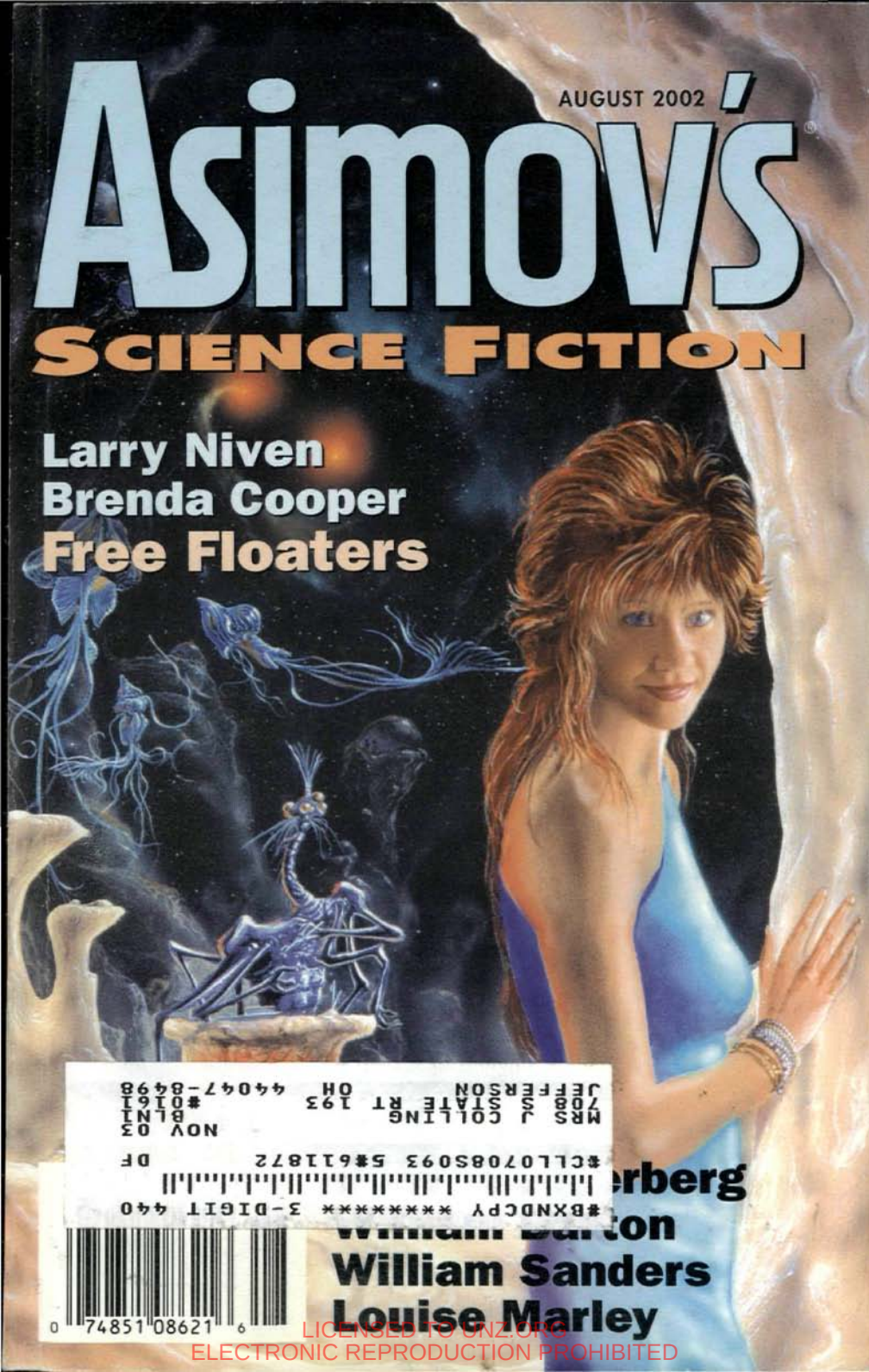

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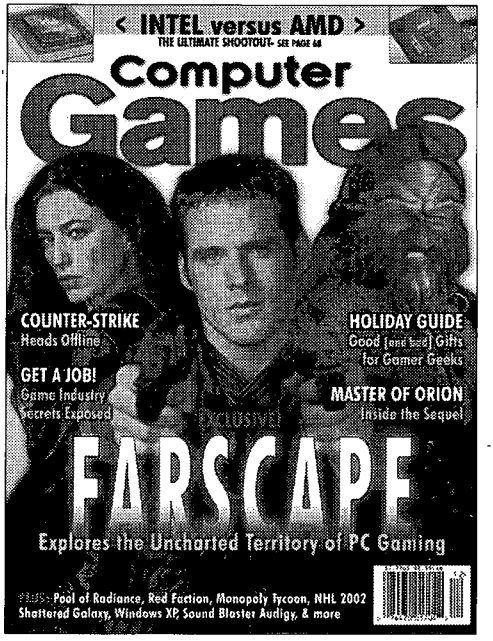

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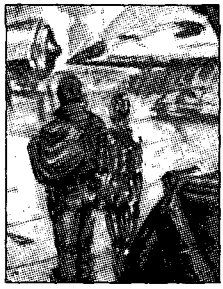

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

The Squid's Elbows

Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* was the first science fiction novel I read, when I was seven or eight years old, and even today, sixty years later, passages from it blaze vividly in my mind: the visit of the *Nautilus,* Captain Nemo's wondrous submarine, to Atlantis; the journey through the coral forest; the voyage through the iceberg zone. But every little boy loves a good monster story, and so it was the struggle with the giant squids that made the deepest impression on my very impressionable young mind:

"I looked in my turn and could not repress a gesture of disgust. Before my eyes was a horrible monster, worthy to figure in the legends of the marvelous. It was an immense cuttlefish, being eight yards long. It swam crossways in the direction of the *Nautilus* with great speed, watching us with its enormous staring green eyes. Its eight arms, or rather feet, fixed to its head, that have given the name of cephalopod to these animals, were twice as long as its body and were twisted like the Furies' hair. One could see the 250 air-holes on the inner side of the tentacles. The monster's mouth, a horned beak like a parrot's, opened and shut vertically. Its tongue, a horned substance, furnished with several rows of pointed teeth, came out quivering from this veritable pair of shears. What a freak of nature, a bird's beak on a mollusk! Its spindle-like body formed a fleshy mass that might weigh 4,000 or 5,000 pounds. . . .

"By this time others had appeared at the port light. I counted seven. They formed a procession after the *Nautilus,* and I heard their beaks gnashing against the iron hull. . . .

"Ten or twelve now invaded the platform and sides of the *Nautilus.* We rolled pell-mell into the midst of this nest of serpents, that wriggled on the platform in the waves of blood and ink. It seemed as though these slimy tentacles sprang up like the hydra's heads. Ned Land's harpoon, at each stroke, was plunged into the staring eyes of the cuttlefish. . . ."

Strong stuff. It made a powerful scene in the James Mason/Kirk Douglas movie that came out a decade after I first read the book. I've been fascinated ever since by the great squid, the sixty-foot-long *Architeuthis,* that was the prototype for Verne's critter and which is still not very well understood by scientists, never having been seen alive in its deep-sea habitat. (In Verne's day it was known only by fragmentary sections found in the stomachs of whales, which is why he thought it had eight tentacles, thus making it an octopus, whereas, like all squids, *Architeuthis* has ten.)

But last winter came the news of a new kind of giant squid that makes gigantic *Architeuthis* seem downright ordinary. How Jules Verne's hyperactive imagination would have reveled in the knowledge of this still unnamed denizen of the sea's depths, a creature so weird that it seems downright extraterrestrial, even though it's as

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much a native of our planet as, well, me and thee.

This newly discovered squid, which has not yet received a scientific name, is not as awesomely huge a creature as *Architeuthis,* but it's big enough to qualify as a genuine monster: twenty feet long, the body eight feet in length, with ten twelve-foot-long tentacles attached.

But size is not the important part of the story, here. Weirdity is.

The usual sort of squid, like the one that gave its all for the calamari salad I had last night at the neighborhood Thai restaurant, has two long, slender tentacles and eight short ones. The short tentacles, and in some species the two long ones too, are equipped with rows of suckers that it uses in snaring and holding its prey. All ten tentacles of the new squid, though, are of equal length—long, skinny things, more like tendrils than tentacles, that dangle beneath the critter like animated fishing-lines searching for small food items that happen to be swimming by.

Wait. There's more.

The squid holds its tentacles outstretched in an exceedingly peculiar *bent* stance that makes it seem as though they have elbow joints. Since squids are invertebrates, they don't actually have elbows or joints of any other kind, but the odd right-angle bend in these tentacles certainly does create an elbowoid look. The general effect has led one scientist to compare the tentacles to the legs of a lunar landing craft—flimsy, threadlike, sharp-angled things designed for a very special purpose.

A squid with elbows! In my youth we used to say, "Well, isn't *he* the bee's knees!" Which can now be updated: "Isn't he the squid's elbows!" Won't make any more sense, fifty years from now, than its predecessor. But at least it sounds modern for the moment.

The other end of the squid is just as strange. Two large fleshy mantles sprout from the squid's rear. The central part of the squid's body is a slender insignificant tube that may weigh no more than twenty-five pounds or so, and these huge mantles, much greater in size than the body to which they are attached, are by far the animal's most conspicuous features. They are vaguely hatchet-like in shape, although they have also been compared to elephant ears and bat wings: i.e., *bizarre.* The squid flaps them like wings as it makes its slow way through the water. The effect must be more than a little spooky.

Don't rush down to your local aquarium to see these guys just yet, though. None have been captured yet, nor have they ever washed up on a beach, as *Architeuthis* specimens sometimes do, or been found in the stomach of a whale.

They are known just from deep-sea photographs, taken in the lightless and still highly mysterious zone of the ocean that begins three thousand feet down, a world unto its own that we are only now beginning to explore in any comprehensive way.

A measure of how little we really know about the deep-sea ecological sphere is that these squids, though newly discovered, seem to be reasonably common down there. Thus far there have been eight sightings of them in the past thirteen years, at depths of one to three miles and at locations all over the world—in the Atlantic Ocean off the Brazilian and African coasts, in the Indian Ocean, in the Gulf of Mexico, and in the Pacific, near Hawaii. Every one of these sightings was accidental. Some of them have been made by geologists looking for underwater oil, working with remote-control submersible vehicles. Others have been found by deep-water oceanog-

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raphers who were searching for something else entirely.

The most recent of these sightings was made by marine biologists from the research institute of the Monterey, California aquarium in the course of a three-month expedition through Hawaiian waters in the spring of 2001. A video camera aboard the *Tiburon,* an unmanned deep-sea submersible that was operating at a depth of more than eleven thousand feet off the north coast of Oahu, picked up the extraordinary sight of one of these fellows calmly going about its day's fishing. The squid came swimming toward the submersible with its long thin tentacles widely outspread in the elbow-bend arrangement, which, it is thought, may be designed to keep them from becoming entangled with one other. Probably that is the normal hunting position. "It seemed to be hanging out its tentacles like a fishing net just waiting for some food to come by," one of the biologists reported. "It certainly wasn't being an active hunter."

The squid approached the submersible closely. Then, evidently deciding there was nothing digestible there, it drew its tentacles close together and flapped the two rounded winglike projections of its mantle to swim away. Rather like Dumbo, Disney's flying elephant, if you can imagine—it's a bit of a stretch—a flying elephant with hardly any body attached to the ears, and ten long dangling tentacles.

On other occasions, though, the squids have taken their time about withdrawing from the scene. There is no reason, after all, why they should show fear of visiting submersibles from the upper world, since such visits have been very few and far between indeed during the thousands or perhaps millions of years that these squids have occu-

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pied the lower depths. They have been known to hang around in the presence of the submersibles, gently waving their wing-like fins to hold their positions. One of them, in fact, prodded a submersible with its tentacle, getting its suckers stuck to it and experiencing some difficulty letting go.

And so we are reminded once again that we share our planet with an amazingly alien ecosphere, occupying some 90 percent of the habitable volume of Earth, that we have only begun to explore. One squid biologist who is studying the new squids, Dr. Michael Vecchione of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, has expressed some surprise over the fact "that they were showing up all over the place in deep water. For this large, highly visible animal to be common in the largest ecosystem on Earth and for us to know nothing about it seems fairly remarkable."

No doubt there are far stranger monsters down there awaiting discovery. We have been sending unmanned submersibles down into the lightless zone below three thousand feet for only forty-five years, and in that time, according to Dr. Clyde Roper of the Smithsonian Institution, we have managed to survey no more than sixty square miles of the deep ocean bottom—an area just a little larger than that of the city of San Francisco. There's plenty more. "It's essentially one great question mark out there," says Dr. Roper.

Who knows what fantastic beings lurk down there?

Captain Nemo, where are you now that we need you? O

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On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

THE HORROR, THE HORROR

definitions

It all runs together, if I let it. Say I'm at a party and I get introduced to someone as Jim Kelly, *the writer*. "So what do you write?" comes the inevitable question. "Sciencefictionfantasyandhorror," I reply, knowing that this response will make perfect sense to upward of 93 percent of those asking. I can almost hear the *clunk* as my career is dropped into a pigeonhole. The next line in the script reads, "Oh, *really?*" (as in, "You're kidding! You don't look like a fruitcake.") or perhaps, "You mean like Stephen King?" And there it is. How simple to say, "Yes, sort of like Stephen King," even though only some of what I type is horror. And if I am pushed hard enough, I might opine that science fiction has about as much—or as little—to do with horror as mystery does.

So what the hell is horror, anyway? According to the entry on horror in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (edited by John Clute and John Grant and published by St. Martin's Griffin—and yes, you probably need this book): "Unlike fantasy, supernatural fiction and science fiction—terms which describe generic structures—horror is a term which describes an affect. The horror story makes its readers feel *horror.*" Later in the entry, the sagacious Clute writes, "It is not enough for the mundane world to be invaded, assaulted, seduced, taught or inveigled from another sphere, as generally happens in supernatural fiction, nor is it enough for monsters to exist—as they often do in fantasy. . . . What generates the frisson of horror is an overwhelming sense that the invaders are obscenely, transgressively impure." Which is fine, except then you might hear aficionados of this genre talking about something called *dark fantasy*. At one time I believe this was a high-faluting term for horror, used by folks who wanted to distance themselves from pop culture hackwork. Remember when science fiction writers tried to replace *sci-fi* with *speculative fiction?* But there is a useful, if slightly fuzzy, distinction to be made, if you imagine that dark fantasy might scare you in the course of pursuing other literary agendas unrelated to horror.

There's a lot of horror, dark fantasy, supernatural fiction—call it what you will—on the web. Let's shine some light on it, shall we?

bloody clicks

Start your exploration of the web's dark worlds at either **Horrorfind** <*http://www.horrorfind.com*> or **Crypt Crawl** <*http://www.cryptcrawl.com*> two excellent search engines and directories. Both are like Swiss Army knives, in that they offer a surprising array of features. For instance, you can compose creepy greeting cards on both sites, which you can then email to your undead friends. Or else download

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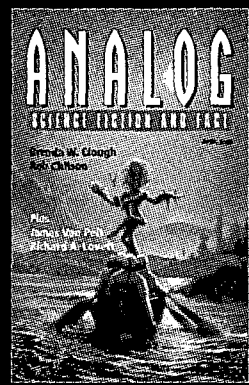

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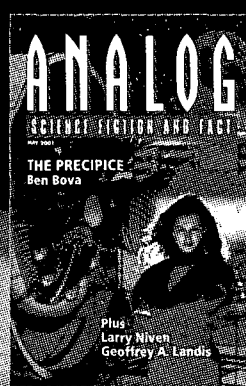

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horror fonts to add a little flair to your next ransom note. You can sign up for a horror email account. Both sites offer stories—Horrorfind's are the more accomplished, since it's a paying market. And then there's the soundtrack. . . .

We interrupt this column for a late-breaking rant. Okay, so you've designed your own website and you want to give it that little something extra that will make it stand out from the trillion other sites in cyberspace. How about some music? You could download a free MIDI file, and have the theme song from *Twilight Zone* or *Tales from the Crypt* or *Buffy* playing while people look around your site. That would be cool, no?

NO! IT WOULD BE VERY ANNOYING AND WOULD MAKE PEOPLE FLEE FROM YOUR SITE SCREAMING. NEVER DO THIS. NEVER, NEVER, NEVER!

We now return you to your regularly scheduled column, already in progress.

. . . rather sit though the *1812 Overture* played on bagpipes. However, I must say that Horrorfind's background music is some of the very best I've heard—a low, eerie drone punctuated by tasty sound effects. Of course, what you're looking to find at Horrorfind and Crypt Crawl are the links. Crypt Crawl lists about twenty-four hundred while Horrorfind has almost six thousand! Admittedly, the vast majority of these are homebrewed. You can waste a lot of time and witness more than your share of bad design and wonky HTML sampling them. There are, however, many gems. To help you find them, both sites segregate out their pick hits on "Top Rated" and "What's Cool" pages.

The **Horror Writers Association** <*http://www.horror.org*> maintains an excellent website with goodies for readers and writers alike. The horror writers would like you to know that, "HWA is a worldwide organization of writers and publishing professionals dedicated to promoting the interests of writers of Horror and Dark Fantasy." Several essays on the craft of writing are posted on the site or you can check out the top forty horror books of all time, as voted by the members of HWA. Alas, only fourteen are currently in print. Anyone with an interest in the genre can fill out the online application to become an HWA Affiliate; in order to become an Active member, you have to have published. Like all writers' organizations, the HWA gives out awards each year to recognize literary achievement: the "Stokers" are named for the author of *Dracula.*

I must admit that at first **The Spook** <*http://www.thespook.com*> took my breath away. As I clicked through this marvelous site, I got a serious alternate history vibe. Imagine a world in which one of *our* magazines had somehow broken out of the genre ghetto. *Way, way out.* We're talking slick and upscale, with ads from the likes of Tiffany, Gran Marnier, Chanel, Acura, and Giorgio Armani. Or as *The Spook's* Editor-in Chief Anthony Sapienza puts it: "*Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker* meet the *Twilight Zone*." In this alternate world, Edgar Allan Poe lived to found *The Atlantic Monthly* and H. P. Lovecraft was President of Brown University.

But these things never happened, more's the pity. And even though it exists and would seem to be flourishing, *The Spook* itself has the shimmer of unreality, a ghostliness, if you will, which is part of its charm. It arrives on your screen as an Adobe PDF file. PDF stands for Portable Document Format; to access *The Spook* you must first download the free **Adobe Acrobat**

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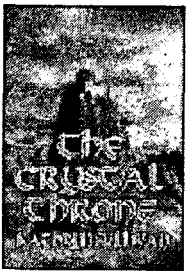

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Reader <*http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html*>, currently in version 5.0 as I write this. This gives *The Spook* the look and feel of a well-designed magazine, not a clunky web page. However, reading *The Spook* takes some getting used to. Since the pages don't fit on the screen and the text is laid out in columns, you'll have to do a lot of scrolling. Until you become an accomplished PDF user, the stories will squirm perversely beneath your gaze. But stick with it, because *The Spook* is serving up fiction by the likes of David J. Schow, Jonathan Carroll, Damon Knight, Ramsey Campbell, and Joyce Carrol Oates as well as a raft of lively interviews, reviews, and essays.

old and new

Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890—1937) is considered by many to be the best writer of weird fiction since Poe. Lovecraft is all over the web; **The Cthulhu Webring** <*http://v.webring.com/hub?ring=cthulhu*> boasts one hundred and forty-nine sites! Consider starting your visit to the realm of the Great Old Ones at **The H. P. Lovecraft Archive** <*http://www.hplovecraft.com*>. This comprehensive site offers not only biographical and bibliographical material, but also such delightful esoterica as a list of his correspondents and his favorite foods: "Pie is my favourite dessert, and blueberry (for summer) and mince (for winter) are my preferred kinds." The bibliography has links to **The H. P. Lovecraft Library** <*http://www.gizmology.net/lovecraft/index.htm*> where many of his most famous works are reprinted online. According to the proprietor, William Johns, almost all of Lovecraft has passed into public domain, although long time Lovecraft publisher **Ark-ham House** <*http:*

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//www.arkham house.com> disputes this claim.

I suppose I have no right to be disappointed by **The Official Stephen King Web Presence** <*http://www.stephenking.com*>, but I am. It says here you'd be better off checking out some of the ninety-five sites on **The Stephen King Webring** <*http://www.stephenking.net/webring*>. The most substantial pages on King's site are his biography, written in part by his wife Tabitha, and his bibliography. There are pages dedicated to "The Now," "The Future," and "The Answers" but they are either advertisements for upcoming projects or else explanations of why he doesn't do stuff, like sign photographs or books or answer fan mail. This appears on the "Rumors" page: "Q: Is it true that he has retired? A: That hasn't happened yet. There are still books coming out through both Scribner and Pocket Books and plans to complete The Dark Tower series, so there will be new books for several more years to come." The "Downloads" page, where his famous experiment in e-publishing, "The Plant" used to live, informs us that "The Plant has furled its leaves." It is otherwise blank.

Now there is no rule that says that literary superstars have to give anything away to their fans, but this site struck me as downright parsimonious, especially if you contrast it to that of King's sometime collaborator. Click over to **Peter Straub** <*http://www.net-site.com/straub*> and you'll find complete chapters of various novels, reviews, interviews, and hilarious commentary on Straub's career by his (imaginary) friend, Professor Putney Tyson Ridge, Ph.D., four-time winner of The International Popular Culture Society's prestigious Elmer J. Atwood Award.

exit

You may have noticed that I haven't listed any media sites in this column. Well, at least not directly. Querying Horrorfind or Crypt Crawl will turn up hundred of hits. Besides, we're all readers here, right? The movie and TV and videogame folk grab much more than their share of our attention, at least in this writer's opinion.

But I will admit to a prejudice when it comes to horror, that has often kept me on the sidelines, both as a producer and a consumer. I'm a little squeamish. I don't mind if Sir Frederick dies trying to stuff his guts back into the gaping wound in his belly, or, the Evil Ones tie young Jennifer to a chair and slice her ears off so they can stick lighted candles into the bloody holes, but I won't stay with any work, no matter how well crafted, where this happens every few minutes—or even every other chapter. The gratuitous escalation of violence in horror films has long since put me off, and I'm afraid I was never much of a fan of splatterpunk.

Which leads me to wonder how much overlap there is in the genre of sciencefictionfantasyandhorror. Certainly Gardner and Sheila have published SF with horrific grace notes, and I believe I could make the case that dark fantasy has occasionally appeared in these pages. Many of the writers who appear here regularly also publish horror elsewhere. So what about it, *Asimov's* readers?

Do starship captains dig vampires? ○

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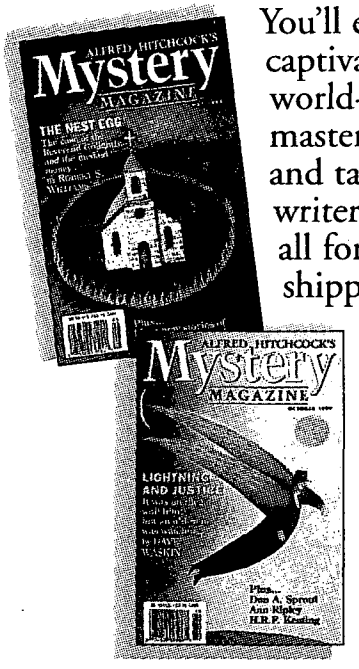

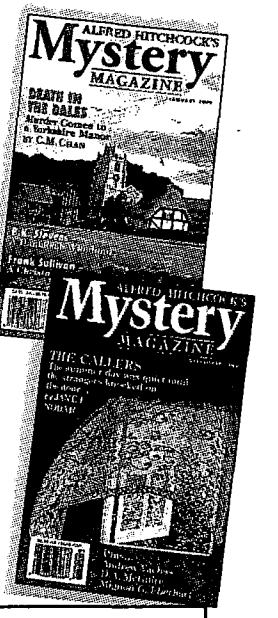

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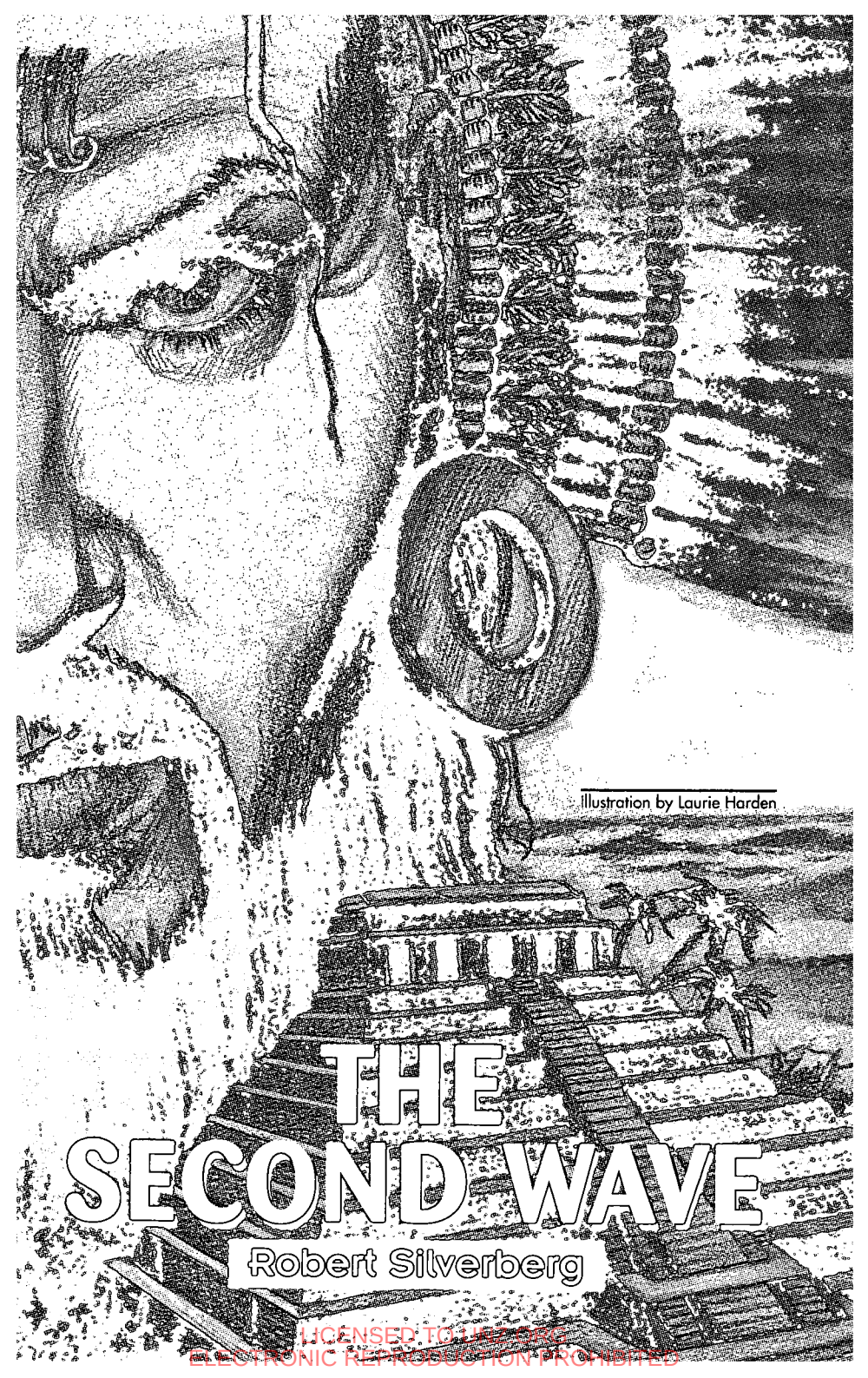

Illustration by Laurie Harden

THE SECOND WAVE

Robert Silverberg

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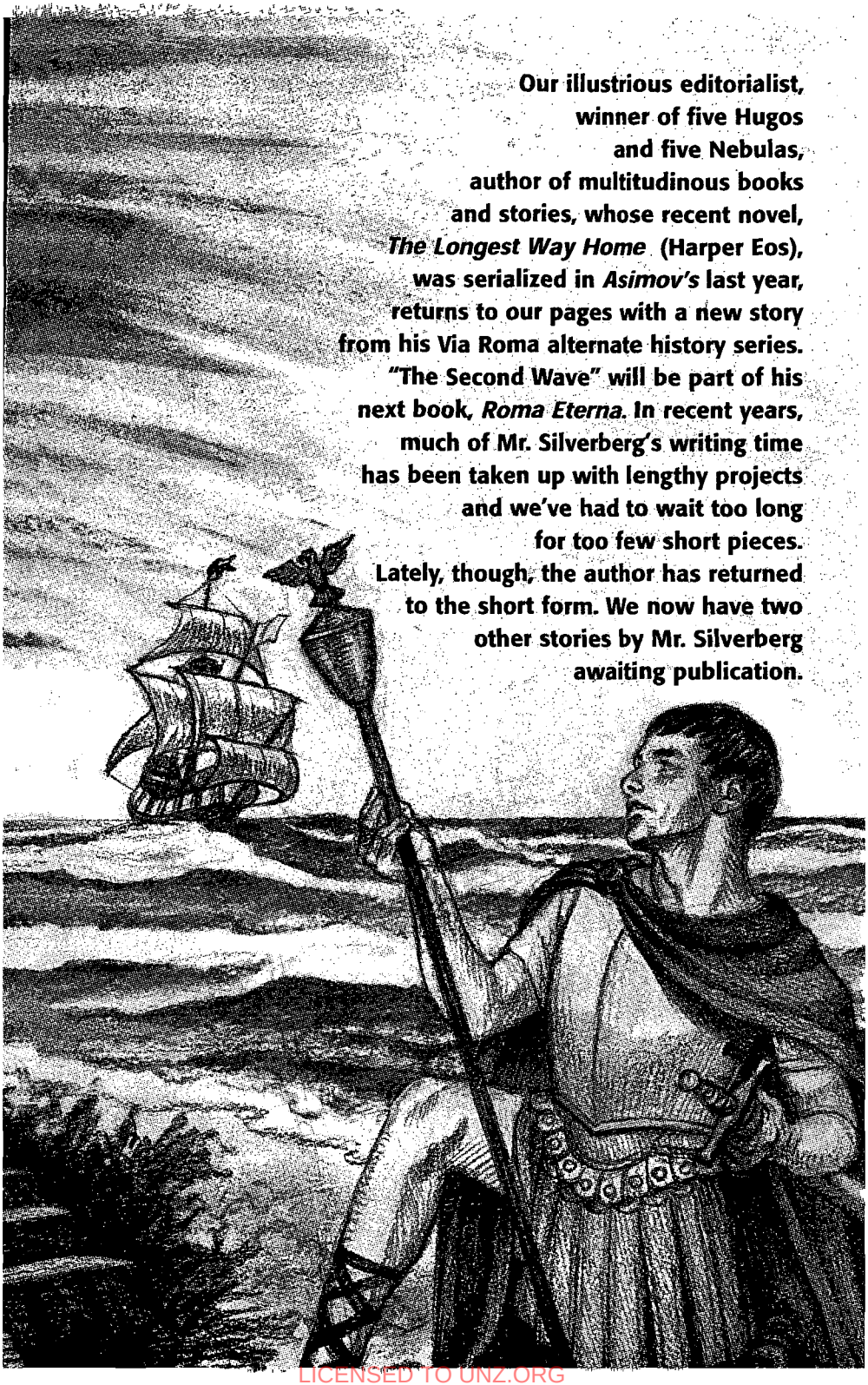

Our illustrious editorialist, winner of five Hugos and five Nebulas, author of multitudinous books and stories, whose recent novel, *The Longest Way Home* (Harper Eos), was serialized in *Asimov's* last year, returns to our pages with a new story from his Via Roma alternate history series. "The Second Wave" will be part of his next book, *Roma Eterna*. In recent years, much of Mr. Silverberg's writing time has been taken up with lengthy projects and we've had to wait too long for too few short pieces. Lately, though, the author has returned to the short form. We now have two other stories by Mr. Silverberg awaiting publication.

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Over the past fifteen years I've sporadically been developing an alternate-world scenario in which the Hebrew exodus from Egypt under Moses never happened. Since the Jews never reached Palestine, Christianity never developed and Rome remained pagan, renewing itself constantly during the period we call the Dark Ages, fending off the invasions of the barbarians and sustaining itself as a thriving worldwide empire for thousands of years. The history of Rome in this alternate world is more or less identical (aside from a somewhat different sequence of third-century Emperors) to that of our *Rome as it developed through the fourth century* A.D., *when Constantine the Great first divided the Empire into eastern and western domains, but then things began to diverge.*

The timeline of the Roma Eterna stories runs from 753 B.C., *the traditional date of the founding of the city; our year 2002 is 2755 by Roman reckoning. Thus the story "Waiting for the End"* (Asimov's, *October/November 1998) is set in the Roman year 1951, which is* A.D. *1198 by our calendrical system. That one told of the invasion and conquest of Rome by its neighbor to the east, the Eastern—or Byzantine—Empire. The present story, "The Second Wave," is set ninety years earlier, in the Roman year 1861 (*A.D. *1108), and deals with the Roman invasion of the New World, which created the problems that led to the Byzantine conquest a couple of generations later.*

—Robert Silverberg

They were the second wave of the invasion. The first had vanished like water into the sands. But now the Emperor Saturninus had sent another fleet to the New World, far larger than the first, and there would be more to follow if need be. "We will beat against their shores as the ocean does, and in the end we will conquer." So the Emperor had declared, five years before, on the day news of the disaster reached the capital. "For Roma is an ocean too: immense, inexhaustible, irresistible. They will not stand against our might."

Titus Livius Drusus had been at his father's side that day at the Senate when the Emperor made that speech. He was eighteen then, a highborn young man of Roma who had not yet settled on his path in life. The Emperor's words had left him profoundly stirred. A far-off new world awaiting conquest—whole unexplored continents far beyond the Pillars of Hercules, brimming with the treasure of mysterious copper-skinned people! And there before the Senate was the towering resplendent figure of the Emperor, magnificent in his robes of Imperial purple, crying out in that wonderfully resonant voice of his for brave men to carry the eagles of Roma's legions to these alien empires.

Here I am, young Drusus thought, focusing every atom of his will on the broad forehead of the Emperor. *I will do it! I am the man! I will conquer this Mexico for you!*

But now five years had passed and the Emperor, true as always to his word, had indeed sent that second expedition across the Ocean Sea to the New World. And Drusus, no longer a starry-eyed boy dreaming of strange new worlds to conquer but an experienced soldier of twenty-three beginning to think of marriage and retirement to a country estate, had been offered a commission in the army of invasion and had accepted it, with rather less enthusiasm than he might have shown earlier. The fate of the first expedition was much on his mind. As he stared out now at the darkness of that enigmatic shore lying just ahead he found himself wondering whether he too

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might be going to leave his bones in this unknown and very probably hostile land, as so many valiant Romans had done before him.

It was shortly before dawn, the third day of the new year 1851. At home, the month of Januarius was the coldest of the year, but if Drusus had needed a reminder that he was far from home, that dry, hot breeze blowing toward him out of the new continent would have provided it. At this time of the year not even the wind out of Africa was as warm as this.

Pale pink strands of first light came up over his shoulder. In the thinning darkness ahead he saw the shadowy outlines of a rocky, inhospitable shore that was crowned on a nearby low hill by a massive white building of impressive height and formidable blocky appearance. The land that stretched off to the west in back of it seemed virtually flat and so densely forested that no sign of habitation was visible.

"What do you think of it, Titus?" asked Marcus Junianus, who had come up quietly on deck beside him. He was two years older than Drusus, a former slave of the family, now a freedman. Free or not, he had chosen to follow Drusus to the New World. They had grown up together; though one was of the ancient Roman nobility and the other the descendant of five hundred years of slaves, they were as close as brothers. Not that anyone would take them for brothers, not ever, for Drusus was tall and pale, with soft straight hair and an aristocrat's fine features and elegant manner of speech, and Marcus Junianus was a short, broad-beamed, swarthy man with a flat nose and thick curling hair, who spoke with the inflections of his class and carried himself accordingly. But between themselves they had never let these distinctions form a barrier: to each other they always had been Marcus and Titus, Titus and Marcus, friends, companions, even brothers, in every important way save one.

"I think it's going to give us a struggle, Marcus. You can smell it in the air." In truth the air itself was unwelcoming: hard, pungent, with an odd sort of spiciness to it that was not at at all pleasant. "What do you think that big building is? A fortress or a temple?"

"A temple, wouldn't you say? The Norseman told us that this was a land of great temples. And why would they bother to fortify their coast when it's already defended by thousands of miles of empty sea?"

Drusus nodded. "A good point. Still, I don't think it would be very clever of us to try to make our landfall right below it. Go and tell the captain to look for a safer harbor a couple of miles south of here."

Marcus went off to give the order. Drusus leaned on the rail and watched the land as it came more clearly into visibility. It *did* seem uninhabited. Long stands of unfamiliar-looking trees stood shoulder to shoulder to form a solid black wall with no openings in view. And yet there was that temple. Someone had hewn those rocks and assembled that forbidding building atop this coastal headland. *Someone,* yes.

He had spent eight weeks at sea getting to this place, the longest voyage of his or anybody's life. In eight weeks you could sail the Great Sea, the Mare Mediterraneum, from end to end any number of times, from the Syrian coast westward to the Pillars of Hercules in Hispania and back to Syria again. The Great Sea! How wrong the ancients had been to give the Mediterraneum so grandiose a name. The Great Sea was a mere puddle compared to this one that they had just crossed, the vast Ocean Sea that separated the worlds. It had been an easy enough journey through steadily warming waters, lengthy and dull but not in any way difficult. You hoisted

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your sails, you aimed your nose westward, you picked up a following wind and off you went, and, yes, sure enough, in the fullness of time you found yourself in a gentle blue-green sea dotted with tropical islands where you could replenish your supplies of food and water with no interference from the simple naked natives, and then, continuing onward, you arrived soon afterward at what was unmistakably the shore of some huge continent, which must beyond any doubt be that Mexico of which the Norseman spoke.

Looking at it now, Drusus felt not fear, for fear was an emotion that he did not regard as permissible to feel, but a certain sense of—what, he wondered? Uneasiness? A sense that this expedition might not be a particularly wise idea?

The possibility of meeting fierce military resistance did not trouble him. It was close to six hundred years since Romans had done any serious fighting, not since Maximilianus the Great had finished off the Goths and Justinianus had put down the unruly Persians, but each succeeding generation had yearned for a chance to show that the old warrior tradition still lived, and Drusus was glad that his was the one that finally would get the opportunity. So let whatever might come, come. Nor did he worry much about dying in battle: he owed the gods a death in any event, and it was always deemed glorious to die for the Empire.

But dying a *foolish* death—ah, that was something else again. And there were plenty of people back at the capital who felt that Emperor Saturninus's hunger to turn the New World into a Roman province was the wildest of foolishness. Even the mightiest of empires must admit its limits. The Emperor Hadrianus, a thousand years ago, had decided that the Empire was becoming too unwieldy, and had turned away from any conquests east of Mesopotamia. Persia and India, and Khitai and Cipangu farther to the east in Asia Ultima where the yellow-skinned folk lived, had been left as independent lands, though tied to Roma by treaties of trade. And now here was Saturninus going the other way, off into the distant west, with dreams of conquest. He had heard tales of the gold of Mexico and another western land called Peru, the Emperor had, and he hungered for that gold. But could this New World be conquered, across such a distance? And, once conquered, could it be administered? Would it not be more intelligent simply to strike up a mercantile alliance with the people of the new continent, sell them Roman goods in return for their abundance of gold, create new prosperity that would bolster the Western Empire against the competition of its prosperous counterpart of the East? Who did Saturninus think he was, Alexander the Great? Even Alexander had turned back from the conquest of distant lands, finally, after reaching the frontiers of India.

Drusus forced himself to brush these treasonous doubts aside. The grandeur that was Roma admitted of no obstacles, he told himself, and, Hadrianus to the contrary, no limits either. The gods had bestowed the world upon the Romans. It said so right there in the first book of Virgil's great poem, that every schoolboy studied: dominion without end. The Emperor Saturninus had decreed that this place was to be Roman, and Drusus had been sent here to help conquer it in Roma's name, and so be it.

Dawn had come by the time the fleet had moved far enough down the coast to be out of sight of that hilltop temple. By the harsh light of morning he had a clearer view of the irregular rock-bound shore, the sandy beaches, the thick forests. The trees, Drusus saw now, were palms of some sort, but their curv-

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ing jagged fronds marked them as different from the ones native to the Mediterranean countries. There was no indication of any settlement here.

Disembarking proved to be a tricky business. The sea was shallow here, and the ships were big ones, specially designed for the long voyage. It was impossible for them to drop anchor very close to shore. So the men had to jump down into the water—it was warm, at any rate—and struggle ashore through the surf, heavily laden with arms and supplies. Three men were swept away by a current that carried them off toward the south, and two of them went under and were lost. Seeing that, some of the others held back from leaving the ship. Drusus himself jumped in and waded ashore to encourage them.

The beach was an eerie white, as though it were made up of tiny particles of powdered bone. It felt stiff to the foot, and crunched when trod upon. Drusus scuffed at it, savoring its strangeness. He thrust his staff of office deep into it, telling himself that he was taking possession of this land in the name of Eternal Roma.

The initial phase of the landing took over an hour, as the Romans established themselves on that narrow strip of sand between the sea and the close-packed palms. Throughout it, Drusus was uncomfortably aware of the tales told by the survivors of the first expedition of Mexican arrows that mysteriously appeared out of nowhere and went straight to the most vulnerable places. But nothing like that happened today. He set the landing party immediately to work cutting down trees and building rafts on which they could transport the rest of the men and equipment and provisions to the camp they would establish here. All up and down the coast, the other commanders were doing the same. The fleet, bobbing out there at anchor, was an inspiring sight: the stout heavy hulls, the high bridges, the great square sails aglow with the Imperial colors.

In the dazzling brightness of the new day the last of Drusus's uncertainties evaporated.

"We have come," he said to Marcus Junianus. "Soon we will see this place. And then we will conquer it."

"You should write those words down," Marcus said. "In future centuries schoolchildren will quote them."

"They are not entirely original with me, I'm afraid," said Drusus.

The Norseman who had enmeshed the Emperor Saturninus in these fantasies of conquest was a certain Haraldus, a gigantic fair-haired mountain of a man who had turned up at the Emperor's winter palace at Narbo in Gallia bearing wild tales of golden kingdoms across the sea. He claimed to have seen at least one of them with his own eyes.

These Norsemen, a savage warlike sort, were common sights in both halves of the Empire. A good many of them had made their way to Constantinopolis, which in their language was called Miklagard, "the mighty city." For a hundred years now the Eastern Emperors had maintained an elite corps of these men—Varangians, they called themselves, "Men of the Pledge"—as their personal bodyguards. Often enough they turned up in the western capital too, which they also referred to as Miklagard. Because they reminded Western Romans of their ancient enemies the Goths, to whom they were closely related, the Emperors at Roma had never cared to hire their own force of Varangian guards. But it was interesting to listen to the tales these much-traveled seafarers had to tell.

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The homeland of these Norsemen was called Skandiai, and they were of three main tribes, depending on whether they came from Svea or Norwegia or the territory of the folk who called themselves Dani. But they all spoke more or less the same uncouth language and all were big, short-tempered people, the men and the women both, resourceful and vengeful and ruthless, who would carry two or three well-honed weapons upon their persons at all times and reached swiftly for their swords or their daggers or their battle-axes whenever they felt offended. Their small sturdy ships traveled freely and fearlessly through the half-frozen waterways of their northern world, carrying them to remote places in the north never visited and scarcely known by Romans, and Norse traders would come down out of those icy lands bearing ivory, furs, seal-oil, whale-oil, and other such goods much desired in the marketplaces of Europa and Byzantium.

This Haraldus was a Svean who said his travels had taken him to Islandius and Grenelandius, which were the Norse names for two islands in the northern part of the Ocean Sea where they had settled in the past two hundred years. Then he had gone onward even farther, to a place they called Vinilandius, or Wineland, which was on the shore of an enormous body of land—a continent, surely—and then, with a little band of companions, he had set out on a voyage of exploration down the entire coast of that continent.

It was a journey that took him two or three years, he said. From time to time they would go ashore, and when they did they often encountered small villages peopled by naked or half-naked folk of unusual appearance, with dark glossy hair, and skin that was dark also, but not in the way that the skins of Africans are dark, and strong-featured faces marked by jutting cheekbones and beak-like noses. Some of these folk were friendly, some were not. But they were all quite backward, artless people who lived by hunting and fishing and dwelled in little tents fashioned from the hides of animals. Their tiny encampments seemed to have little to offer in the way of opportunities for trade.

But as Haraldus and his companions continued south, things became more interesting. The air was softer and warmer here, the settlements more prosperous-looking. The wandering Norsemen found good-sized villages built beside lofty flat-topped earthen mounds that bore what appeared to be temples at their summits. The people wore elaborate woven garments and bedecked themselves with copper earrings and necklaces made of the teeth of bears. They were a farming folk, who greeted the travelers pleasantly and offered them meals of grain and stewed meats, served in clay vessels decorated with strange images of serpents that had feathers and wings.

The Norsemen worked out an effective method of communicating with these mound-building people by simple sign language, and learned that there were even richer lands farther to the south, lands where the temple mounds were built not of earth but of stone, and where the jewelry was made not of copper but of gold. How distant these places were was unclear: the voyagers just were told, with many gestures of outflung arms, to head down the coast until they reached their destination. And so they did. They went on southward and the land, which had been on their right all the way down from Wineland, dropped away from them so that they were in open sea. The mound people had warned them that that would happen. Some instinct told them to swing westward here and then south again when they picked up signs of an approaching shore, and after a time there was land

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ahead and they saw the coastline of the unknown western continent once again.

Here they landed and went ashore. And everything that the mound-building people of the northern land had said proved to be true.

"There is a great nation there," Haraldus told the Emperor. "The citizens, who are extremely friendly, wear finely woven robes and they have an astounding abundance of gold, which they use in every imaginable way. Not only do men and women both wear golden jewelry, but even the toys of the children are of gold, and the chieftains take their meals on golden plates." He spoke of colossal stone pyramids like those of Aegyptus, of shining marble temples, of immense statues depicting bizarre gods that looked like monsters. And, best of all, this wealthy land—Yucatan, its people called it—was only the nearest of many rich kingdoms in this remarkable new world across the sea. There was another and even greater one, the Norsemen had been informed, off to the west and north of it. That one was called Mexico, or perhaps Mexico was the name for this entire territory, Yucatan included: that was unclear. Sign language could communicate only so much. And still farther away, some inconceivable distance to the south, was still another land named Peru, so wealthy that it made the wealth of Mexico and Yucatan seem like nothing at all.

Upon hearing this the Norsemen realized that they had stumbled upon something too great for them to be able to exploit by themselves. They agreed to split into two parties. One group, headed by a certain Olaus Danus, would remain in Yucatan and learn whatever they could about these kingdoms. The other, under the command of Haraldus the Svean, would carry the news of their discovery to the Emperor Saturninus and offer to lead a Roman expedition to the New World on a mission of conquest and plunder, in return for a generous share of the loot.

Norsemen are a quarrelsome lot, though. By the time Haraldus and his friends had retraced their coastal path back to Vinilandius in the far north, feuding over rank aboard their little ship had reduced their numbers from eleven to four. One of these four was slain by an angry brother-in-law in Vinilandius; another perished in a dispute over a woman during a stop in Islandius; what happened to the third man, Haraldus did not say, but he alone reached the mainland of Europa to tell the tale of golden Mexico to Saturninus.

"Instantly the Emperor was gripped by an overpowering fascination," said Drusus's father, the Senator Lucius Livius Drusus, who was at court the day Haraldus had his audience. "You could see it happening. It was as though the Norseman had cast a spell over him."

That very day the Emperor proclaimed the western continent to be Nova Roma, the new overseas extension of the Empire—the *Western* Empire. With a province of such fantastic opulence gathered under its sway, the West would gain permanent superiority in its rivalry with its increasingly troublesome sister realm, the Empire of the East. Saturninus raised a veteran general named Valerius Gargilius Martius to the rank of Proconsul of Mexico and gave him command of three legions. Haraldus, though not even a Roman citizen, was dubbed a duke of the realm, a station superior to Gargilius Martius's, and the two men were instructed to cooperate in the venture. For the voyage across the Ocean Sea a fleet of specially designed ships was constructed that had the great size of cargo vessels but the swiftness of warships. They were powered by sails as well as oars and were big

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enough to carry an invading army's full complement of equipment, including horses, catapults, tents, forges, and all the rest. "They are not a warlike race, these Mexicans," Haraldus assured the Emperor. "You will conquer them with ease."

Of the thousands of men who set forth with great fanfare from the Gallian port of Massilia, just seventeen returned home, fourteen months later, parched and dazed and enfeebled to the point of collapse from an interminable ocean voyage of terrible hardship in a small open raft. Only three had sufficient strength even to frame words, and they, like the others, died within a few days of their arrival. Their stories were barely coherent. They gave rambling accounts of invisible enemies, arrows emerging out of nowhere, frightful poisonous insects, appalling heat. The friendliness of the citizens of Yucatan had been greatly overestimated, it seemed. Apparently the whole expeditionary force but for these seventeen had perished, one way or another. Of the fate of Duke Haraldus the Norseman and of the Proconsul Valerius Gargilius Martius they could tell nothing. Presumably they were dead too. The only thing that was certain was that the expedition had been a total failure.

At the capital, people solemnly reminded one another of the tale of Quinctilius Varus, the general whom Augustus Caesar had sent into the Teutonic forests to bring the northern barbarians under control. He too had had three legions under his command, and through his stupidity and incompetence they were massacred virtually to the last man in an ambush in the woods. The elderly Augustus never entirely recovered from the catastrophe. "Quinctilius Varus, give me back my legions!" he would cry, over and over. And he said no more about sending armies to conquer the wild Teutons.

But Saturninus, young and boundlessly ambitious, reacted differently to the loss of his expedition. Construction of a new and greater invasion fleet began almost immediately. *Seven* legions would be sent this time. The Empire's most capable military men would lead it. Titus Livius Drusus, who had already won distinction for himself in some minor border skirmishes in Africa, where even at this late date wild desert tribes occasionally caused trouble, was among the bright young officers chosen for a high position. "It is madness to go," his father muttered. Drusus knew that his father was growing old and conservative, but still he was a man of profound understanding of events. Drusus also knew, though, that if he refused this commission, which the Emperor himself had offered him, he was dooming himself to a lifetime of border duty in places so dismal that they would make him long most keenly for the comforts of the African desert.

"Well," said Marcus Junianus as he and Drusus stood side by side on the beach, supervising the unloading of the provisions, "so here we are in Yucatan. A strange sort of name for a place that is! What do you think it means, Titus?"

"'I don't understand you.'"

"Pardon me? I thought I was speaking very clearly, Titus. I said, 'What do you think it means?' I was referring to Yucatan."

Drusus chuckled. "I heard you. And I answered you. You asked a question, and 'I don't understand you,' is what I replied. All around the world for centuries now we've been going up to the natives of one far-off place or another and asking them in nice grammatical Latin what that place is called. And since they don't know any Latin, they reply 'I don't understand you' in their own language, and we put that down as the name of the place. In this case it

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was Norse, I guess, that they don't happen to speak. And so, when Haraldus or one of his friends asked the natives the name of their kingdom, they answered 'Yucatan,' which I'm almost certain isn't the name of the place at all, but merely means—"

"Yes," said Marcus Junianus. "I think I grasp the point."

The immediate task at hand was to set up a camp as quickly as they could, before their arrival attracted the attention of the natives. Once they were secure here at the water's edge they could begin sending scouting expeditions inland to discover the location of the native towns and assess the size of the challenge facing them.

For most of the voyage the fleet had kept close together, but as the ships approached the coast of Yucatan they had fanned out widely, by prearrangement, so that the initial Roman beachhead would cover twenty-five or thirty miles of the shoreline. Three legions, eighteen thousand men, would constitute the central camp, under the command of the Consul Lucius Aemilius Capito. Then there would be two subsidiary camps of two legions apiece. Drusus, who had the rank of legionary legate, would be in command of the northernmost camp, and the southernmost one was to be headed by Masurius Titianus, a man from Pannonia who was one of the Emperor's special favorites, though nobody in Roma could quite understand why.

Drusus stood in the midst of the bustle, watching with pleasure as the camp swiftly came together. Workmen swarmed everywhere. The expedition was well equipped: Saturninus had poured a fortune into it, an amount equal to the total annual revenue of several provinces, so they said. Brawny loggers quickly chopped down dozens of the palm trees that fringed the beach and the carpenters got busy squaring the lumber off to use in constructing the palisades. The surveyors laid out boundaries for the camp along the beach's widest part and marked guidelines for its interior: the central street, the place where the legate's tent would go, the tents of the craftsmen, of the legionaries, of the scribes and recorders, the site of the stables, the workshops, the granary, and all the rest. The horses had to be brought ashore also, and given an opportunity to regain their land legs after their long confinement aboard the ships.

As the guide-stakes went into the ground, the infantrymen set about erecting the rows of leather tents where they would dwell. Foragers, accompanied by an armed force, made the first ventures inland to find sources of food and water.

These were experienced men. Everyone knew his job. By nightfall, which came on surprisingly early—but this was winter, after all, Drusus reflected, warm though the climate was—the outline of the camp was clearly delineated and the beginnings of a rampart had risen. There did not seem to be any rivers or streams nearby, but, as Drusus had suspected from the presence of so dense a forest, fresh water was readily obtainable even so: the ground, which was exceedingly stony beneath its shallow covering of soil, was honeycombed everywhere with passageways through which underground water came welling up. One of these wells lay not far inland, and a team of engineers started to sketch out the route of a shallow canal that would carry its cool, sweet water the short distance to the camp. The foragers had also found abundant wildlife in the adjacent forest: a multitude of small and apparently fearless deer, herds of what seemed to be little pigs of a kind that had no tails and stiff upright ears, and vast numbers of large,

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very odd-looking birds with brilliant reddish-green plumage and great fleshy wattles at their throats. So far, so good. The Norseman had said they would have no difficulties finding provisions, and it looked as though he had told the truth about that.

At midday Drusus sent a runner down the beach toward the central camp to bear news of his landing. The man returned a little before sundown with word from the Consul Lucius Aemilius Capito that the main body of men had come ashore as well, and the work of building a camp was under way. To the south, Masurius Titianus had also effected his landing without encountering opposition from the natives.

The first night in the camp was a tense one, but first nights in camp in an unfamiliar place always were. Evening dropped over them like a shroud, with scarcely any interval between sunset and darkness. There was no moon. The stars above the camp were unusually brilliant, but they were arranged in the strange, unsettling configuration of the southern latitudes. The heat of the day did not abate, and the men in the tents complained of the stifling atmosphere inside. Raucous screeching cries came from the forest. Birds? Monkeys? Who could say? At least they didn't sound like tigers. Clouds of mosquitoes appeared, pretty much similar to those of the Old World, but the humming noise that they made as they swooped in upon one was much nastier, almost jubilant in its intensity, and their stings were maddeningly fierce. At one point Drusus thought he saw a flight of bats passing close overhead. He loathed bats with a powerful loathing that he did not at all understand. Perhaps they are not bats but only owls, he thought. Or some new kind of eagle that flies by night.

Because the camp did not yet have a proper rampart, Drusus tripled the ordinary watch. He spent much of his night strolling among the sentries himself. They were uneasy and would appreciate his presence. They too had heard those tales of arrows whistling out of nowhere, and it heartened them to have their commander sharing their risks on this first and most uncertain of nights.

But the night passed without incident. In the morning, as work on the palisade resumed, Drusus summoned Marcus Junianus, who was serving as his prefect of the camp, and ordered him to begin assembling the scouting party that would attempt to find the location of the nearest Mexican village. Junianus saluted smartly and hurried off.

Later in the day Drusus sent for him again, on another matter. A long while went by; and then the messenger returned with the news that Junianus was not in the camp.

"Not in the camp?" said Drusus, puzzled.

"No, sir. I am told that you sent him out on a scouting mission this morning, sir."

Drusus stared. Anger rose in him like a fountain, and it was all he could do to keep from striking the man. But that would be stupidly misdirected anger, he knew. Marcus was the one at fault, not the messenger. He had never given Marcus any order to go out scouting, just to get a team of scouts together. With the rampart only half finished, it was much too soon to dispatch scouts: the last thing Drusus wanted now was to alert the natives prematurely to their presence, which could easily happen if the scouts stumbled incautiously into one of their villages. And in any case he had never had any intention of sending Marcus himself out with those scouts. Scouts were expendable; Marcus was not.

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He realized that this was something he should have foreseen. Marcus, now that he was a freedman, was forever trying to demonstrate his civic valor. More than once he had put himself needlessly in danger when he and Drusus were serving on border patrol in Africa. Sometimes one had to take deliberate risks, yes—Drusus himself, standing watch with his men this night past, had done just that. But there were necessary risks and there were foolish ones. The thought of Marcus blithely misunderstanding his intent so that he could lead the scouting party in person was infuriating.

There was nothing that could be done about it now, though. He would have to take it up with Marcus when the scouting party returned, and forbid him to place himself at risk again.

The problem was that the day passed, and sundown came and deepened swiftly into black night, and the scouts did not return.

Drusus had had no discussion with Marcus about the length of time the scouting mission was supposed to stay out. He had never had it in mind himself to ask the scouts to remain out overnight, not the very first night; but what Marcus had had in mind, Jupiter alone could say. Maybe he planned to keep going until he found something worth finding.

Morning came. No Junianus. At midday, deeply exasperated and more than a little apprehensive, Drusus sent a second band of scouts off to look for the first ones, telling them that under no circumstances were they to remain out after dark. But they returned in less than three hours, and the instant Drusus saw the look on the face of their captain, a Thracian named Rufus Trogus, he knew there was trouble.

"They have been captured, sir," said Trogus without any preamble whatever.

Drusus worked hard to conceal his dismay. "Where? By whom?"

The Thracian told the story quickly and concisely. A thousand paces inland due west and two hundred paces to the north they had come upon signs of a struggle, broken branches, scuffed soil, a fallen scabbard, a javelin, a sandal. They were able to follow a trail of disturbed undergrowth for another hundred paces or so westward; then the forest closed over itself and there was no further sign of human presence, not so much as a bent twig. It was as though the attackers, having surprised and very quickly overcome the scouting party, had in short order melted into the air, and their prisoners also.

"You saw no bodies?"

"None, sir. Nor signs of bloodshed."

"Let's be grateful for that much, I suppose," Drusus said.

But it was a miserable situation. Two days on shore and he had already lost half a dozen men, his best friend among them. At this moment the natives might be putting them to the torture, or worse. And also he had inadvertently sent word to the folk of this land that an invading army had once again landed on their shores. They would have found that out sooner or later anyway, of course. But Drusus had wanted to have some sense of where he was located in relation to the enemy, first. Not to mention having his camp fully walled in, his siege engines and other war machinery set up and ready, the horses of the cavalry properly accustomed to being on land once again, and all the rest.

Instead it was possible now that they might find themselves under attack at any moment, and not in any real way prepared for it. How splendid, that Titus Livius Drusus would be remembered down the ages for having so

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swiftly placed the second New World expedition on the path to the same sort of catastrophe that had overwhelmed the first!

It was appropriate, Drusus knew, to send word of what had happened down the beach to Lucius Aemilius Capito's camp. One was supposed to keep one's superior officer informed of things like this. He hated the idea of confessing such stupidity, even if the stupidity had been Marcus Junianus's, not his own. But the responsibility ultimately was his, he knew. He scribbled a note to the effect that he had sent a scouting party out and it appeared to have been captured by enemies. Nothing more than that. No apology for having let scouts go out before the camp was completely defended. Bad enough that the thing had happened; there was no need to point out to Capito how serious a breach of standard tactics it had been.

From Capito, toward nightfall, came back a frosty memorandum asking to be kept up to date on developments. The implication was there, more in what Capito did not say than in what he did, that if the natives did happen to strike at Drusus's camp in the next day or two, Drusus would be on his own in dealing with it.

No attack came. All the next day Drusus moved restlessly about the camp, urging his engineers onward with the job of finishing the palisade. When new foraging parties went out to hunt for deer and pigs and those great birds, he saw to it that they were accompanied by three times as many soldiers as would ordinarily be deemed necessary, and he worried frantically until they returned. He sent another party of scouts out under Rufus Trogus, too, to investigate the zone just beyond the place where Marcus and his men had been taken and look for clues to their disappearance. But Trogus came back once more with no useful information.

Drusus slept badly that night, plagued by mosquitoes and the unending shrieks and boomings of the jungle beasts and the moist heat that wrapped itself about him with almost tangible density. A bird in a tree that could not have been very far from his tent began to sing in a deep, throbbing voice, a tune so mournful it sounded to Drusus like a funeral dirge. He speculated endlessly about the fate of Marcus. They have not killed him, he told himself earnestly, because if they had wanted to do that, they would have done it in the original ambush in the forest. No, they've taken him in for interrogation. They are trying to get information from him about our numbers, our intentions, our weapons. Then he reflected once more that they were unlikely to get such information out of Marcus without torturing him. And then—

Morning came, eventually. Drusus emerged from his tent and saw sentries of the watch coming down the beach in his direction.

Marcus Junianus was with them, looking weary and tattered, and trailing along behind were half a dozen equally ragged Romans who must have been the scouts he took with him on his venture into the forest.

Drusus suppressed his anger. There would be time enough for scolding Junianus later. The flood of relief that surged through him took precedence over such things, anyway.

He embraced Junianus warmly, and stepped back to study him for signs of injury—he saw none—and said, finally, "Well, Marcus? I didn't expect you to stay away overnight, you know."

"Nor I, Titus. A few hours, a little sniffing around, and then we'd turn back, that was what I thought. But we had hardly gone anywhere when

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they fell upon us from the treetops. We fought, but there must have been a hundred of them. It was all over in moments. They tied us with silken cord—it felt like silk, anyway, but perhaps it was some other kind of smooth rope—and carried us away on their shoulders through the forest. Their city is less than an hour's march away."

"Their *city,* you say? In the midst of this wilderness, a city?"

"A city, yes. That is the only word for it. I couldn't tell you how big it is, but it would be a city by anyone's reckoning, a very great one. It is the size of Neapolis, at the least. Perhaps even the size of Roma." The forest had been cleared away over an enormous area, he said, gesturing with both arms. He told of broad plazas surrounding gleaming temples and palaces of white stone that were greater in their dimensions than the Capitol in Roma, of towering pyramids with hundreds of steps leading to the shrines at their summits, of terraced avenues of the same finely chiseled white stone stretching off into the jungled distance, with mighty statues of fearsome gods and monstrous beasts lining them for their entire lengths. The population of the city, Junianus said, was incalculably huge, and its wealth had to be extraordinary. Even the common folk, though they wore little more than simple cotton tunics, looked prosperous. The majestic priests and nobles who moved freely among them were magnificent beyond belief. Junianus struggled for words to describe them. Garbed in the skins of tigers, they were, with green and red capes of bright feathers on their shoulders, and brilliant feather headdresses that rose to extravagant, incredible heights. Pendants of smooth green stone hung from their earlobes, and great necklaces of that same stone were draped about their necks, and around their waists and wrists and ankles they had bangles of shining gold. Gold was everywhere, said Junianus. It was to these people as copper or tin was to Romans. You could not escape the sight of it: gold, gold, gold.

"We were fed, and then we were taken before their king," Junianus told Drusus. "With his own hands he poured out drink for us, using polished bowls of the same smooth green stone that they employ for their jewelry. It was a strong sweet liquor, brewed of honey, I think, with the herbs of this land in it, strange to the taste, but pleasing—and when we had refreshed ourselves he asked us our names, and the purpose for which we had come, and—"

"He *asked* you, Marcus? And you understood what he was saying? But how was that possible?"

"He was speaking Latin," Junianus replied, as though that should have been self-evident. "Not very good Latin, of course, but one can expect nothing better from a Norseman, is that not so? In fact it was very poor Latin indeed. But he spoke it well enough for us to comprehend what he was saying, after a fashion. Naturally I didn't tell him outright that I was a scout for an invading army, but it was clear enough that he—"

"Wait a moment," Drusus said. His head was beginning to spin. "Surely I'm not hearing this right. The king of these people is a *Norseman?*"

"Did I not tell you, Titus?" Junianus laughed. "A Norseman, yes! He's been here for years and years. His name is Olaus Danus, one of those who came down from Vinilandius with Haraldus the Svean on that first voyage long ago, when the Norse discovered this place, and he's lived here ever since. They treat him almost like a god. There he sits on a glistening throne, with a scepter of green stone in his hand and a bunch of golden necklaces around his throat, and wearing a crown of feathers half as tall as I am, and they

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strew flower petals before him whenever he gets up and walks, and crouch before him and cover their eyes with their hands so he won't blind them with his splendor, and—"

"Their king is a Norseman," Drusus said, lost in astonishment.

"A great hulking giant of a Norseman with a black beard and eyes like a devil's," said Junianus. "Who wants to see you right away. Send me your general, he said. I must speak with him. Bring him to me tomorrow, early in the day. There should not be any soldiers with him. The general must come alone. He told me that I am permitted to accompany you as far as the place in the forest where we were set upon, but then I must leave you, and you must wait by yourself for his men to fetch you. He was very clear on that point, I have to say."

This was rapidly getting beyond the scope of Drusus's official authority. He saw no choice but to take himself down the shore in person and report the whole business to the Consul Lucius Aemilius Capito.

Capito's camp, Drusus was pleased to see, was not nearly as far along in construction as Drusus's own. But the Consul had had his tent, at least, erected—unsurprisingly, it was quite a grand one—and Capito himself, flanked by what looked like a small regiment of clerks, was at his desk, going over a thick stack of inventory sheets and engineering reports.

Looking up, he gave Drusus a bilious glare, as though he regarded a visit from the legionary legate of the northern camp as an irritating intrusion on his contemplation of the inventory sheets. There had never been much amiability between them. Capito, a hard-faced, slab-jawed man of fifty, had evidently had some serious battles with Drusus's father in the Senate, long ago, over the size of military appropriations—Drusus was unsure of the details, and did not want to know—and had never taken the trouble to conceal his annoyance at having had the younger Drusus wished off on him in so high a position of command.

"A problem?" Capito asked.

"It would seem so, Consul."

He set the situation forth in the fewest possible sentences: the safe return of the captured scouts, the discovery of the startling proximity of a major city with its inexplicable Norse king, and the request that Drusus take himself there, alone, as an ambassador to that king.

Capito seemed to have forgotten all about the missing party of scouts. Drusus could see him rummaging through his memory as though their disappearance were some episode out of the reign of Lucius Agrippa. Then at last he fixed his cold gaze on Drusus and said, "Well? What do you intend to do?"

"Go to him, I suppose."

"You suppose? What other option is there? By some miracle this man has made himself king of these copper-skinned barbarians, the gods alone know how, and now he summons a Roman officer to a conference, quite possibly for the sake of concluding a treaty that will convey this entire nation to the

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authority of His Imperial Majesty, which was the intent of these Norsemen in the first place, I remind you—and the officer hesitates?"

"Well—but if the Norseman has some other and darker intention, Consul—I will be going to him without an escort, I remind you—"

"As an ambassador. Even a Norseman would not lightly take the life of an ambassador, Drusus. But if he does, well, Drusus, I will see to it that you are properly avenged. You have my pledge on that. We will extract rivers of blood from them for every drop of yours that is shed."

And, favoring Drusus with a basilisk smile, the Consul Lucius Aemilius Capito returned his attention to his inventories and reports.

It was well past dark by the time Drusus reached his own camp again. The usual beasts were howling madly in the woods; the usual mysterious flying creatures were flitting by overhead; the mosquitoes had awakened and were seeking their nightly feast. But by now he had spent four nights in this place. He was growing accustomed to it. A little to his own surprise, he passed a good night's sleep, and in the morning made ready for his journey to the city of the copper-skinned folk.

"He will not harm you," said Marcus Junianus gloomily, as they reached the trampled place in the forest where they were supposed to part company. "I'm entirely certain of that." His tone did not carry much conviction. "The Norse are savage with each other, but they'd never lift a hand against a Roman officer."

"I don't expect that he will," Drusus said. "But thank you for your reassurance. Is this the place?"

"This is the place. Titus—"

Drusus pointed back toward the camp. "Go, Marcus. Let's not make a drama out of this. I'll speak to this Olaus, we'll find out how things stand here, and by evening I'll be back, with some idea of the strategy to follow next. Go. Leave me, Marcus."

Junianus gave him a quick embrace and a sad smile and went trudging off. Drusus leaned against the rough trunk of a palm tree and waited for his barbarian guides to arrive.

Perhaps an hour went by. Though it was only an hour past sunrise, the heat was already becoming troublesome. If this is what winter is like here, he thought, I wonder how we will survive a summer. Drusus had chosen to dress formally, greaves and chain mail, the crested helmet, his cloak of office as a legate, his short ceremonial sword. He had wanted to muster as much Roman majesty as he could when he came before the barbaric king of these barbaric people. But it was all a little too much for the warmth of this place, and he was sweating as though he were at the baths. An insect or two had penetrated his armor, too: he was aware of bothersome ticklings along his back. He was beginning to feel a little faint by the time he caught sight of a line of marchers emerging out of the thickets in front of him, moving forward without making a sound.

There were six of them, bare to the waist, dusky-skinned, with tightly set, unsmiling mouths, noses like hatchet-blades, and odd sloping foreheads. They were amazingly short, no bigger than small women, but their dignity and gravity of bearing made them seem taller than they were, and also they wore headdresses of jutting green and yellow feathers that rose to an astounding height. Three were armed with spears, three with nasty-looking swords made of some dark, glassy stone, their blades notched like those of saws.

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Were these his guides, or his executioners?

Drusus stood motionless as they approached. It was an uneasy moment for him. Of personal fear he had none. As ever, he understood that he owed the gods a death, sooner or later. But, as ever, he did not want it to be a shameful, embarrassing death—walking with his eyes wide open into the clutches of a murderous enemy, for instance. In times of danger he had always prayed that if the time of his death were at hand, let it at least serve some useful purpose for the Empire. There could be no purpose in dying stupidly.

But these men hadn't come here to kill him. They reached his side and took up positions flanking him, three before, three behind, and studied him for a moment with eyes black as night and utterly expressionless. Then one of them signaled with the tips of two fingers, and they led him away into the forest.

The hour was still short of noon when they reached the city. Marcus Junianus had not exaggerated its splendor. If anything he had underestimated its grandeur, not having the command of language that would allow him to describe the place in all its majesty. Drusus had grown up in Urbs Roma, and that was his standard of greatness in a city, eternal Roma, than which there was no city greater, not even, so he had heard, Constantinopolis of the East. But this city seemed just as imposing as Roma, in its very different way. And, he realized, it might not even be the capital city of these people. Once more Drusus began to wonder just how simple the conquest of this New World was going to be.

He was in a plaza of titanic size. It was bordered on each side by vast stone buildings, some rectangular, some pyramidal, all of them alien in style but undeniably grand. There was something strange about them, and after a moment he realized what it was: there were no arches anywhere. These people did not seem to make use of the arch in their construction. And yet their buildings were very large, very solid-looking. Their façades were elaborately carved with geometric designs and painted in brilliant colors. Long rows of stone columns stood before them, engraved with savage, barbaric figures that looked like warriors in full regalia, no two alike. The columns too were painted: red, blue, green, yellow, brown. In the very center of the plaza was a stone altar with the statue of a double-headed tiger on it; to each side of it were curious figures of a reclining man with his knees drawn up and his head turned to one side. Some god, no doubt, for each figure's upturned belly bore a flat stone disk that was covered with offerings of fruit and grain.

Throngs of people were everywhere about, just as Marcus had said, commoners in their skimpy tunics, nobles in their flamboyant headdresses and robes, all of them on foot, as though neither the cart nor the litter was known here. Nor was there a single horse in sight. Whatever had to be carried was being carried by men, even the heaviest of burdens. The creatures must not be found in this New World, Drusus thought.

Nobody seemed to take notice of Drusus as he passed among them.

His guardians marched him to the flat-topped pyramid on the far side of the plaza and up an interminable stone staircase to the colonnaded shrine at the top.

Olaus the Norseman was waiting for him there, enthroned in regal majesty with the scepter of green stone in his hand. Two richly costumed natives, high priests, perhaps, stood beside him. He rose as Drusus ap-

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peared and extended the scepter toward him in a gesture of the greatest solemnity.

He was so startling a sight that Drusus felt a sudden momentary weakness of his knees. Not even the Emperor of Roma, the Augustus Saturninus Caesar Imperator himself, had ever stirred any such awe in him. Saturninus, with whom Drusus had had personal audience on more than one occasion, was a tall, commanding-looking figure, majestic, unmistakably royal. For all that, though, you knew he was only a man in a purple robe. But this Olaus, this Norse king of Yucatan, seemed like—what?—a god?—a demon? Something prodigious and frightening, a fantastic, almost unreal being.

His costume itself was terrifying: the tiger pelt around his waist, the necklace and pendant of bear's teeth and massive green stones lying over his bare chest, the long golden armlets, the heavy earrings, the intricate crown of gaudy feathers and blazing gems. But this outlandish garb, nightmarish though it was, formed only a part of the demonic effect. The man himself provided the rest. Olaus was as tall as anyone Drusus ever had seen, better than half a head taller than Drusus himself, and Drusus was a tall man. His body was a massive column, broad through the shoulders, deep through the chest. And his face—

Oh, that face! Square-jawed, with a great outthrust chin, and dark blazing eyes set wide apart in deep, brooding sockets, and a ferocious snarling maw of a mouth. Though most of his countrymen were blond and ruddy, Olaus's hair was black, a wild mane above and a dense, bristling beard covering his cheeks and much of his throat. It was the face of a beast, a beast in human form, cruel, implacable, remorseless, enduring. But the intelligence of a man shone out of those eyes.

Marcus's description had not even begun to prepare him for this man. Drusus wondered if he was expected to salute him by some sort of abasement, kneeling, genuflecting, something like that. No matter: he would not do it. But it seemed almost to be the appropriate thing to do before a man of this sort.

Olaus came forward until he was disturbingly close and said, in bad but comprehensible Latin, "You are the general? What is your name? Your rank?"

"Titus Livius Drusus is my name, son of the Senator Lucius Livius Drusus. I hold the appointment of legionary legate by the hand of Saturninus Augustus."

The Norseman made a low rumbling sound, a kind of bland growl, as though to indicate that he had heard, but was not impressed. "I am Olaus the Dane, who has become king of this land." Indicating the man on his left, a scowling, hawk-nosed individual dressed nearly as richly as he was himself, the Norseman said, "He is Na Poot Uuc, the priest of the god Chac-Mool. This other is Hunac Ceel Cauich, who is the master of the holy fire."

Drusus acknowledged them with nods. Na Poot Uuc, he thought. Hunac Ceel Cauich. The god Chac-Mool. These are not names. These are mere noises.

At another signal from the Norseman, the priest of Chac-Mool produced a bowl of that polished green stone that they seemed to admire so much here, and the master of the holy fire filled it with the same sweet liquor that Marcus had told him of receiving. Drusus sipped it cautiously. It was both sweet and spicy at the same time, and he suspected that it would turn his head if he had very much of it. A few politic sips and he looked up, as though sated.

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The priest of Chac-Mool indicated that he should drink more. Drusus pretended to do so, and handed the bowl back.

Now the Norseman returned to his throne. He beckoned for some of the honey-wine himself, drank a bowlful of it at a single draught, and, transfixing Drusus with those fiery, fearsome eyes of his, launched abruptly into a rambling tale of his adventures in the New World. The story was difficult to follow, for Olaus's command of Latin had probably never been strong to begin with, and plainly he had not spoken it at all for many years. His grammar was largely guesswork and his sentences were liberally interspersed with phrases from his own thick-sounding northern tongue and, for all Drusus knew, the local lingo as well. But it was possible for Drusus to piece together at least the gist of the story.

Which was that Olaus, after Haraldus and his friends had left him here in Yucatan and sailed off toward Europa to bring the news of the New World to the Emperor, had very quickly established himself as a man of consequence and power among the people of this place, whom he referred to as the Maia. Whether that was their own name for themselves or some invention of Olaus's, Drusus could not tell. Nor did he get any clear notion of what had become of the other Norsemen who had stayed behind in the New World with Olaus, and he was shrewd enough not to ask: he knew well enough what a brawling, murderous bunch this race was. Put seven of them in a room and there will be four left alive by morning, and one of those will set fire to the building and leave the other three to burn as he slips away. Surely Olaus's companions all were dead by now.

Olaus, though, through his size and strength and unshakeable self-assurance, had managed to make himself first the war-leader of these people, and then their king, and, by now, virtually their god. It had all happened because a neighboring city, not long after Olaus's arrival, had chosen to make war against this one. There was no sovereign authority in this land, Drusus gathered: each city was independent, though sometimes they allied themselves in loose confederacies against their enemies. These Maia all were fierce fighters; but when war broke out, Olaus trained the warriors of this city where he was living in military methods of a kind they had never imagined, a combination of Roman discipline and Norse brutality. Under his leadership they became invincible. City after city fell to Olaus's armies. For the first time in Maian history a kind of empire was formed here in Yucatan.

It seemed to Drusus that Olaus claimed also to have made contact with the other kingdoms of the New World, the one to the west in Mexico and the one to the south that was called Peru. Had he gone to those distant places himself, or simply sent envoys? Hard to tell: the narrative swept along too quickly, and the Norseman's way of speaking was too muddled for Drusus to be certain of what he was saying. But it did appear that the peoples of all these lands had been made aware of the white-skinned, black-bearded stranger from afar who had brought the warring cities of Yucatan together in an empire.

It was the troops of that empire that met the three legions of Saturninus's first expedition, and wiped them out with ease.

The Maian armies had used the knowledge of Roman methods of warfare that Olaus had instilled in them to defend themselves against the legions' attack. And when they made their own response, it was to strike from ambush in a way that Roman military techniques, magnificently effective though they had proven everywhere else, were entirely unsuited to handle.

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"And so they all perished," Olaus concluded, "except for a few that I allowed to escape to tell the tale. The same will happen to you and your troops. Pack up now, Roman. Go home, while you still can."

Those eyes, those frightful eyes, were bright with contempt.

"Save yourselves," Olaus said. "Go."

"Impossible," said Drusus. "We are Romans."

"Then it will be war. And you will be destroyed."

"I serve the Emperor Saturninus. He has laid claim to these lands."

Olaus let out a diabolical guffaw. "Let your Emperor claim the Moon, my friend! He'll have an easier time of conquering it, I promise you. This land is mine."

"Yours?"

"Mine. Earned by my sweat and, yes, my blood. I am the master here. I am king, and I am their god, even. They look upon me as Odin and Thor and Frey taken all together." And then, seeing Drusus's uncomprehending look: "Jupiter and Mars and Apollo, I suppose you would say. They are all the same, these gods. I am Olaus. I reign here. Take your army and leave." He spat. "*Romans!*"

Lucius Aemilius Capito said, "What kind of an army do they have, then?"

"I saw no army. I saw a city, peasants, stonemasons, weavers, goldsmiths, priests, nobles," Drusus said. "And the Dane."

"The Dane, yes. A wild man, a barbarian. We'll bring his pelt home and nail it up on a post in front of the Capitol the way one would nail up the pelt of a beast. But where is their army, do you think? You saw no barracks? You saw no drilling-grounds?"

"I was in the heart of a busy city," Drusus told the Consul. "I saw temples and palaces, and what I think were shops. In Roma, does one see any barracks in the middle of the Forum?"

"They are only naked savages who fight with bows and javelins," said Capito. "They don't even have a cavalry, it seems. Or crossbows, or catapults. We'll wipe them out in three days."

"Yes. Perhaps we will."

Drusus saw nothing to gain by arguing the point. The older man bore the responsibility for conducting this invasion; he himself was only an auxiliary commander. And the armies of Roma had been marching forth upon the world for thirteen hundred years, now, without encountering a rival who could stand against them. Hannibal and his Carthaginians, the furious Gallic warriors, the wild Britons, the Goths, the Huns, the Vandals, the Persians, the bothersome Teutons—each had stepped forward to challenge Roma and each had been smashed in turn.

Yes, there had been defeats along the way. Hannibal had made a great nuisance of himself, coming down out of the mountains with those elephants and causing all kinds of problems in the provinces. Varus had lost those three legions in the Teutonic woods. The invasion force under Valerius Gargilius Martius had been utterly destroyed right here in Yucatan only a little more than five years ago. But one had to expect to lose the occasional battle. In the long run, mastery of the world was Roma's destiny. How had Virgil said it? "To Romans I set no boundary in space and time."

Virgil hadn't looked into the eyes of Olaus the Dane, though, and neither had the Consul Lucius Aemilius Capito. Drusus, who had, found himself wondering how the seven legions of the second expedition would actually

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fare against the forces of the bearded white god of the Maia. Seven legions: what was that, forty thousand men? Against an unknown number of Maian warriors, millions of them, perhaps, fighting on their home grounds in defense of their farms, their wives, their gods. Romans had fought against such odds before and won, Drusus reflected. But not this far from home, and not against Olaus the Dane.

Capito's plans involved an immediate assault on the nearby city. The Roman catapults and battering rams would easily shatter its walls, which did not look nearly so strong as the walls of Roman cities. That was odd, that these people would not surround their cities with sturdy walls, when there were enemies on every side. But the enemies must not understand the use of the catapult and the ram.

Once the walls were breached the cavalry would go plunging through the plaza to strike terror in the breasts of the citizenry, who had never seen horses before and would think of them as monsters of some sort. And then an infantry assault from all sides: sack the temples, slaughter the priests, above all capture and slay Olaus the Dane. No business about imprisoning him and bringing him back in triumph to Roma, Capito said: no, find him, kill him, decapitate the empire he had built among these Maia with a single stroke. Once he was gone, the whole political structure would dissolve. The league of cities would fall apart, and the Romans could deal with them one at a time. All military discipline among these people would dissolve too, without Olaus, and they would become feckless savages again, fighting in their futile helter-skelter way against the formidably disciplined troops of the Roman legions.

The dark fate of the first wave of the invasion indicated nothing that the second wave needed to take into account. Gargilius Martius hadn't understood what sort of general he was facing in Olaus. Capito did, thanks to Drusus; and by making Olaus his prime target he would cut off the source of his enemy's power in the earliest days of the campaign. So he declared: and who was Titus Livius Drusus, only twenty-three years old and nothing more than an auxiliary commander, to say that things would not happen that way?

Intensive preparations for battle began at once in all three Roman camps. The siege machines were hauled into position at the edge of the forest, and work began on cutting paths through the trees for them. The cavalrymen got their steeds ready for battle. The centurions drilled and redrilled the troops of the infantry. Scouts crept out under cover of night to probe the Maian city's walls for their weakest points.

It was hard work, getting everything ready in this terrible tropical heat, that clung to you like a damp woolen blanket. The stinging insects were unrelenting in their onslaught, night and day, not just mosquitoes and ants, but scorpions also, and other things to which the Romans could give no names. Serpents now were seen in the camps, quick, slender green ones with fiery yellow eyes; a good many men were bitten, and half a dozen died. But still the work went on. There were traditions of many centuries' standing to uphold here. Julius Caesar himself was looking down on them, and the invincible Marcus Aurelius, and great Augustus, the founder of the Empire. Neither scorpions nor serpents could slow the advance of the Roman legions, and certainly not little humming mosquitoes.

Early in the afternoon on the day before the attack was scheduled to begin the clouds suddenly thickened and the sky grew black. The wind, which

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had been strong all day, now became something extraordinary, furnace-hot, roaring down upon them out of the east, bringing with it such lightning and thunder that it seemed the world was splitting apart, and then, immediately afterward, the torrential rains of a raging storm, a storm such as no man of Roma had ever seen or heard of before, that threatened to scoop them up as though in the palm of a giant's hand and hurl them far inland.

The tents went almost immediately, one after another ripping free of its pegs and whisking away. Drusus, taking refuge with his men under the wagons, watched in amazement as the first row of trees along the beach bent backward under the force of the gale so that their crowns almost touched the ground, and then began to topple as their roots lost their grip. Some did a crazy upside-down dance before they fell. The wagons themselves were shunted about, rising and tipping and crashing down again. The horses set up a weird screaming sound of terror. Someone cried out that the ships were capsizing, and, indeed, many of them had, Drusus saw, the ones whose crews had not finished taking down the sails before the storm's full fury struck. And then a towering wave came up out of the sea and crashed with devastating strength against the western wall of the palisade, sweeping it away.

The power of the storm seemed almost supernatural. Was Olaus the Dane in league with the gods of this land? It was as though he did not deign to expend his warriors against the invaders, but had sent this terrible tempest instead.

Nor was there any way to hide from it. All they could do was to lie cowering in the midday darkness, pinned down along this narrow strip of beach, while the whirlwinds screamed above them. Lightning cut across the sky like the flash of mighty swords. The boom of thunder mingled with the horrifying wail of the rending winds.

After some hours the rain seemed to slacken, and then it abruptly halted. An eerie stillness descended over the scene. There was something strange, almost crackling, about the quiet air. Drusus rose, stunned, and began to survey the devastation: the ruined walls, the vanished tents, the overturned wagons, the scattered weaponry. But then almost at once the wind and rain returned, sweeping back as if the storm had only been mocking them with that interlude of peace, and the renewed battering went on all night.

When morning came the camp was a shambles. Nothing that they had built still stood. The walls were gone. So was a wide swathe of beachfront trees. There were deep pools all up and down the beach and hundreds of drowned men lay asprawl in them. Many of the ships had disappeared and others were lying on their sides in the water.

The day brought choking heat, air so clogged with moisture it was next to impossible to breathe, and wave upon wave of noxious creatures—snakes, spiders, avalanches of stinging ants, platoons of scorpions, and all manner of other unpleasant things—that the storm appeared to have flushed out of the forest and driven toward the beach. It was like a dream that would not end with the coming of daybreak. Grimly Drusus marshaled his men and set them to working at cleaning the place up, but it was hard to know where to begin, and everyone moved as though still adrift in sleep.

For two days they struggled against the chaos that the storm had left. On the second morning Drusus sent a runner down toward Capito's camp to find out how things had fared there, but the man returned in little more than an hour, reporting that a great arc of beachfront had been washed away not far to the south, cutting the shoreline route in half, and the forest

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flanking the coast was such a maze of fallen trees that he had found that impassable too and had to turn back.

On the third day came the first Maian offensive: a shower of arrows, descending without warning out of thin air. No archers were in view: they had to be well back in the forest, sending their shafts aloft without aiming, using bows of unusual force and carrying power. Down from the sky the arrows came in the hundreds, in the thousands, even, striking at random in the Roman camp. Fifty men perished within moments. Drusus ordered five squadrons of armored infantrymen into the forest under the command of Marcus Junianus in search of the attackers, but they found no signs of anyone.

The next day a ship flying the banner of Lucius Aemilius Capito appeared in the harbor, with three more behind it. Drusus had himself rowed out to greet the Consul. Capito, looking very much the worse for wear, told him that the storm had all but destroyed his camp: he had lost nearly half his men and all his equipment, and the site itself had been rendered unusable by flooding. These were his only surviving ships. Unable to make contact with the southern camp of Masurius Titanius, he had come sailing up the coast, hoping to find Drusus's camp still reasonably intact.

Drusus had no alternative but to surrender command of the camp to Capito, although the older man seemed addled and befogged by all that had befallen him. "He is useless," said Marcus Junianus vehemently, but Drusus shrugged away his friend's objections: Capito was the senior officer, and that was that.

Another attack by archers came the next day, and the day after that. The arrows came in thicker clouds even than before, falling in dense barrages from the sky. Drusus understood now that there was no end to the Maian archers—he imagined thousands of them, millions, standing calmly in row upon row for miles, each row waiting to step forward and discharge its arrows when the one before it had had its turn. This land was full of people and all of them were enemies of Roma. And here the invading force waited in the wreckage of its camp, unable to move fifty feet into that steaming inimical jungle, vulnerable to new storms, venomous crawling creatures, hunger, illness, mosquitoes, arrows. Arrows. It was an impossible situation. Things could not have been worse for Quinctilius Varus who had lost the three legions of Augustus Caesar. But there were *seven* legions at risk here.

After proper consultation with the obviously ailing Capito, Drusus stationed a line of his own archers along the beach, who met the Maian onslaught with shafts of their own, sent blindly into the bush. This had some small effect: a dozen dead Maia were found after the battle. They were wearing armor of a sort, made of quilted cotton. But the Romans had lost twenty more to the arrows falling from the sky in the second attack, and fifteen in the third. The camp was still full of snakes, and they did lethal work also; and other men puffed up and died from the stings of insects, no one knew which.

Fever was the next enemy—the men began sickening by the dozens—and food was beginning to run short, the storm having denuded the nearby forest of its deer and pigs. Marcus Junianus drew Drusus aside and said, "We are beaten, even as the first expedition was. We should get aboard our ships and sail for home." Drusus shook his head, though he knew it was true. Any order to retreat would have to come from Capito, and the Consul was lost in some foggy feverish dream.

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So the days passed. Each dawn brought its casualties from disease or hunger or simple weariness, and the sporadic attacks by the Maian archers brought more. "We will smash down the walls of their city," Capito declared in one of his few lucid moments, but Drusus knew there was no possibility of that. It was all they could do to hold their own here at the camp, forage for food and water, drive off the unending waves of archers.

On the twenty-third day a little band of men, perhaps fifty of them, gaunt and ravaged, came staggering up the beach from the south. They were the only survivors of Masurius Titanius's camp, who had cut their way through the forest in search of other remaining Romans. Titanius himself was dead, and all their ships had gone down in the storm.

"We have to leave this place," Drusus told the glassy-eyed Capito. "There's no hope for us here. The archers will pick us off by handfuls every day, and if the rest of us don't die of fever, eventually Olaus the Dane will send an army in here to finish the job."

"The Emperor has sent us to conquer this land," said Capito, rising halfway to a sitting position and glaring around with some desperate semblance of vitality. "Are we not Romans? Do we dare return to His Imperial Majesty with a sorry tale of failure?" And sank back exhausted, muttering *in indistinct whispers; but Drusus knew that he must still regard him as* the commander.

On the twenty-eighth day several hundred Maian troops appeared on the beach armed with spears, swarthy little men practically naked except for feather headdresses and the quilted-cotton armor. Drusus himself led the counterattack, though he was hard pressed to find enough men capable of withstanding the rigors of battle. The Maia conducted themselves surprisingly well against Roman swords and Roman shields, but finally were driven off, at the cost of thirty Roman lives. A few more battles like this, Drusus thought, and we are finished.

Capito died of his fever the next day.

Drusus saw to it that he had a proper burial, as befitted a Consul who had died in the service of the Empire on a foreign shore. When the last words had been chanted and the last shovelful of sand had been thrown upon the grave, Drusus, taking a deep breath, turned to his lieutenants and said, "Well, we are done with this, now. To the ships, everyone! To the ships!"

This time, of the more than forty thousand men who had gone forth on Roma's second attempt to conquer the New World, six hundred returned. Hundreds more were lost at sea in the return voyage, including those aboard the vessel that Drusus had placed under the command of Marcus Junianus. For Drusus that was the hardest blow of all, losing Marcus on this idiotic adventure in folly. Try as he could to look upon Marcus's death with the dispassionate eye of a Roman of ancient days, he found himself incapable of hiding from the pain of his grief. He owed the gods a death, yes, but he had not owed them Marcus's death, and he knew he would carry the sorrow of that loss, and the guilt of it, to his grave.

The arduous voyage home had left him greatly weakened. He required two weeks of rest at his family estate in Latium before he was strong enough to deliver his report to the Emperor, who received him at the thousand-year-old royal villa at Tibur.

Saturninus seemed to have grown much older since Drusus last had seen him. He was not as tall as Drusus remembered—perhaps he had begun to

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stoop a little—and his lustrous black hair was touched now with the first gray. Well, everyone gets older, Drusus thought. But something else had gone from the Emperor beside his youthful glow. That aura of irrepressible regal vitality that had made him such an awesome figure seemed to have left him as well. Perhaps it was the passing of time, thought Drusus, or perhaps it was only his own memories of Olaus the Dane, that man of truly boundless force and limitless ferocity, that by comparison had lessened the Emperor in his eyes.

The Emperor asked Drusus, in a distant, somewhat dim way, to tell him of the fate of the second expedition. Drusus replied in a measured, unemotional tone, describing first the land, the climate, the splendor of the one Maian city that he had seen. Then he went on to the calamity itself: there had been great problems, he said, the heat, the serpents and scorpions and the stinging ants, disease, the hostility of the natives, above all a terrible storm. He did not mention Olaus the Dane. It seemed unwise to suggest to the Emperor that a savage Norseman had built an empire in that far-off land that was able to hold Roma at bay: that would only fire Saturninus up with the desire to bring such a man to Roma in chains.

Saturninus listened to the tale in that same remote manner, now and again asking a question or two, but showing a striking lack of real interest. And now Drusus was approaching the most difficult part of his report, the summary of his thoughts about his mission to the New World.

This had to be done carefully. One does not instruct an Emperor, Drusus knew; one merely suggests, one guides him toward the conclusions that one hopes he will reach. One has to be particularly cautious when one has come to the realization that a favorite project of the Emperor's is wrongheaded and impossible.

So he spoke warily at first about the difficulties they had encountered, the challenge of maintaining supply lines over so great a distance, the probable huge native population of the New World, the special complexities posed by climate and disease. Saturninus appeared to be paying attention, but from very far away.

Then Drusus grew more reckless. He reminded the Emperor of his revered predecessor the Emperor Hadrianus, who had built the very villa where they were sitting now: how Hadrianus had come to see, in the end, that Roma could not send her legions to every nation of the world, that there were limits to her grasp, that certain far frontiers had to be left unconquered. Although at first he had not agreed with Hadrianus's thinking, Drusus told the Emperor, his experiences in Yucatan had changed his mind about that.

The Emperor no longer appeared to be listening, though. And Drusus realized that it was very likely that he had not been listening for some while. In a sudden desire to break through this glacial remoteness of Saturninus's he found himself on the verge of saying outright, "The thing is impossible, Caesar, we will never succeed, we should give it up as a bad job. For if we continue it will destroy many thousands of our best troops, it will consume our revenues, it will break our spirit."

But before any of those words could pass his lips he heard the Emperor murmur, like an oracle speaking in a trance, "Roma is the ocean, Drusus, immense and inexhaustible. We will beat against their shores as the ocean does." And he realized in shock and horror that the Emperor was already beginning to plan the next expedition. O

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I TALK TO THE TREES

I talk to the trees
and they talk back to me.

They bear us no animosity
(trees are incapable of that!)

yet they don't like us much.
The way we cut them down

to fill our homes and offices
with slabs of their dead flesh.

Still they are only trees,
nothing but leaves and limbs

rooted deep in the earth,
unable to move or speak,

their thoughts so slow
(their tenacity so fair!)

they can take centuries
to reach a conclusion.

—Bruce Boston

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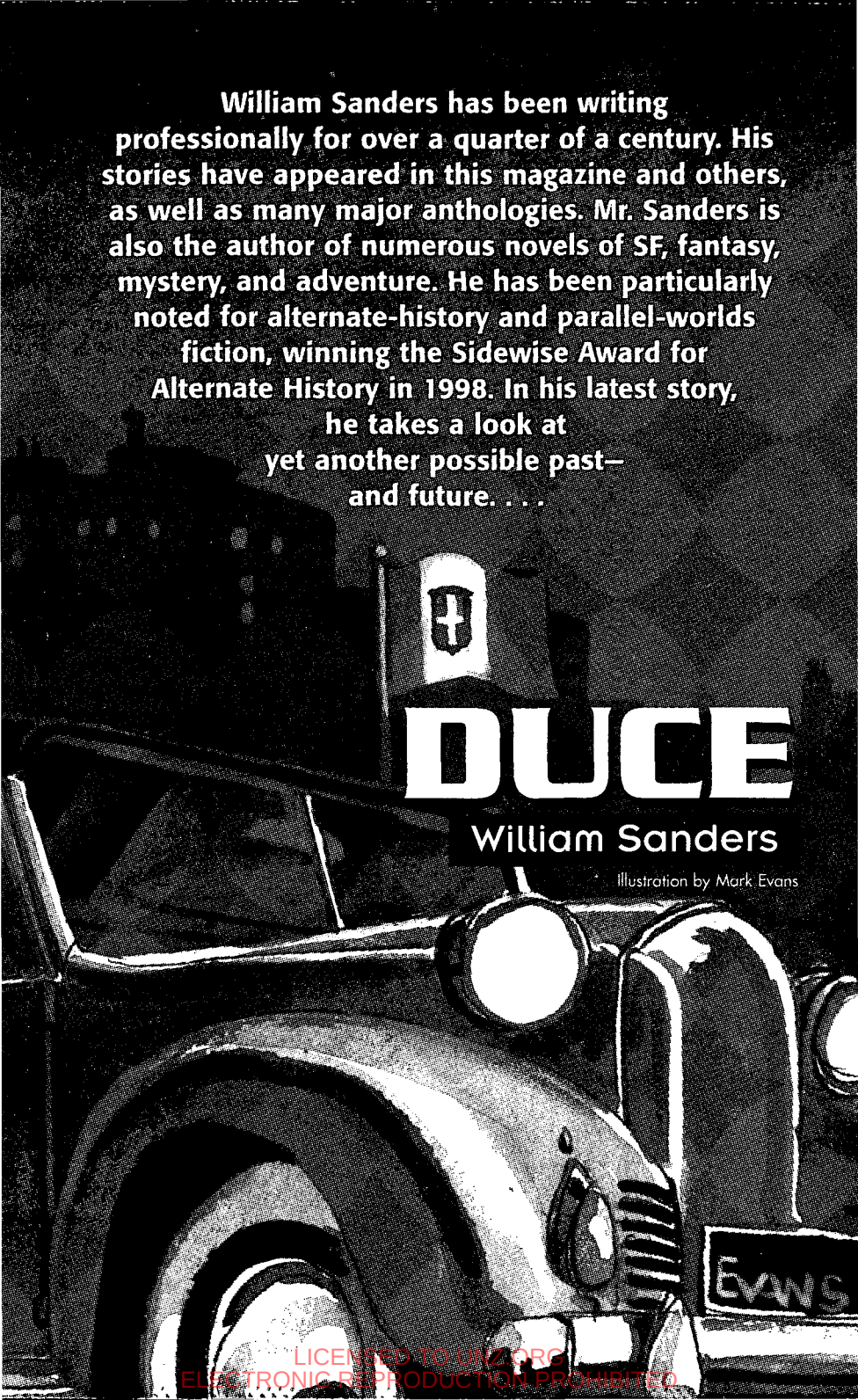
William Sanders has been writing professionally for over a quarter of a century. His stories have appeared in this magazine and others, as well as many major anthologies. Mr. Sanders is also the author of numerous novels of SF, fantasy, mystery, and adventure. He has been particularly noted for alternate-history and parallel-worlds fiction, winning the Sidewise Award for Alternate History in 1998. In his latest story, he takes a look at yet another possible past—and future. . . .



DUCE

William Sanders

Illustration by Mark Evans

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Ritter rested his forearm across the steering wheel of the stolen taxi and looked at his watch. "Not long now," he said.

In the back seat, Gruhn looked up from the submachine gun in his lap long enough to say, "If he isn't late."

He snapped the magazine into place with a sharp click. "He does not seem," he said, "to be a punctual person."

Ritter laughed softly. "When I was attached to the embassy here, we had a joke that he had made the trains run on time but no one had been able to make him do the same."

Gruhn made a derisive snorting sound. Ritter turned and looked back over the seat back. "Well," he said, "after all, from his viewpoint it's not necessarily a bad thing. Makes it harder," he grinned at Gruhn, "for certain people."

Gruhn snorted again. "He's not concerned about security. Just look at the fool, riding around in that open car."

"You're right about that. Even those two carloads of bodyguards—he's been known to play childish games, having his driver speed up and slow down, just to confuse them. He simply doesn't take the danger seriously. You see," Ritter said, "he believes his people love him."

"Even though several of them have tried to kill him."

Ritter spread his hands. "He is very good at believing what he wants to believe and ignoring unwelcome facts. Like most people, only more so . . . but yes," he said, "if he had any sense he'd save that beautiful Astura for parades, and get himself something with armor and bullet-proof glass. Like the Führer."

He rubbed his chin, which itched from two days without a chance to shave. He hated the dirty feeling of a stubbly face, though it did add a convincing touch to his appearance, especially behind the wheel of a taxi in this town.

"But then," he said, "if he had any sense we wouldn't have to be here doing this job, would we?"

Gruhn growled a wordless assent, nodding. He leaned back in the seat and looked at the big wooden-stocked Beretta submachine gun lying across his thighs. "Clumsy Italian piece of shit," he muttered. "I could do this better with my MP44."

"A weapon that will not even exist for several more years," Ritter pointed out. "We're creating enough of a paradox being here in our own short-lived flesh, without leaving something like that lying around afterward."

He jerked a thumb at the red-painted cylinders lying on the seat beside Gruhn. "Besides, the grenades are going to be your main weapon. And I know," he added quickly, "you'd rather have a couple of *Stielhandgranaten*, but the Breda is a perfectly good grenade and there are damned good reasons it won't do to leave anything pointing to the Reich. As you know."

Gruhn raised a finger and an eyebrow. "*Jawohl,*" he said dryly, "*Herr Sturmbannführer.*"

Ritter turned back around without saying anything more. Let it go. It was all nonsense anyway; Gruhn was an expert killer with any sort of weapons or for that matter none. Griping was just his way of dealing with the strain of waiting. Ritter couldn't really blame him; his own nerves were tight as the high strings on a piano.

Of course they were both on edge from fatigue; it had not been an easy

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couple of days. Almost immediately on arrival it had become obvious that the original plan was, for various reasons, utterly impossible. That wasn't catastrophic; it had been understood all along that they might have to improvise—all Skorzeny's men were trained to do that, to think on their feet and use whatever resources came to hand. But it hadn't been easy, all the same; it had taken time to study the possibilities and reconnoiter the area—Ritter knew the city streets fairly well, having been stationed here for two years before the war, but too much was at stake to trust to memory—and come up with a new plan.

And, in the meanwhile, to stay alive and at liberty in this city where there were no friends or allies and no safe places to go. Ritter spoke the language fluently, but not well enough to pass for a native, and Gruhn's heavily accented Italian was worse. A couple of obvious foreigners checking into a hotel would almost certainly have drawn the attention of the very efficient secret police, who made a point of having informants in such places.

So they had spent the first night in a small public garden near the river, hiding under the bushes like American Indians in one of Karl May's books, taking turns sleeping. At least they could do that; they could sleep anywhere, after some of the places they had slept over the last few years.

Then last night they had hung out in a cheap and dimly lit bar, keeping to themselves and speaking to no one, just a couple of unshaven men in rumpled dark suits with a battered leather bag on the floor between them, until it was time to go shopping—as Gruhn put it—for a car.

By the time they had finally got themselves a taxi, and then disposed of the driver's body, it was too late for worthwhile sleep, though Gruhn had napped a little in the back seat during the last hour before dawn. All in all it was no wonder they were snapping at each other like a couple of peevish old ladies.

Gruhn said, "All right, but I wish we had some help on this. You've got to admit our chances of success would be a lot better."

"True. And plenty of people in this city right now would gladly risk their lives to help us, if they knew what we intend. But it's too risky," Ritter said. "These people inform on one another as enthusiastically as the Irish."

"*Scheisse,*" Gruhn said. "You think I meant Italians? What good would they be? I meant we need some more of our own people."

"Undoubtedly," Ritter agreed. "But it was not possible to send more. So said the good Doktor Niedermann, and who should know better the limits of his own machine?"

In fact, the old man had been frankly dubious about sending even two men. "It will tax the capacity of the projector to the limit," he said, shaking his head. "We will be lucky if it doesn't burn itself up on the first transmission, let alone sending a second. A third is not to be thought of."

And, looking even more worried: "Besides, the more men we send, the greater the paradox effect. As it is we may be about to bring the world to an end."

"The world is already about to end," Himmler told him. "The Russians are on the outskirts of Berlin. The Führer is virtually a prisoner in his own bunker. If there is a chance to save the Reich, it is worth any risk. If not, then the world is not worth preserving."

* * *

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"Of course," Ritter said now, "we could go home and ask for help. Take the train up to Berlin, demand to see the Führer, lay it all out for him: '*Mein Führer,* we have come from five years in the future. Your friend and ally Benito Mussolini is about to have a very bad idea, which will lead him to do something very foolish. As a result, Germany will lose the war, the Red Army will overrun Berlin, and you yourself will either be killed or taken prisoner. Therefore we are here to assassinate Il Duce. Would you please lend us a few good men to make sure we get him? Yes, we were sure you would.'"

Gruhn was laughing, something he rarely did. "Yes, yes. I can picture this. Or perhaps," he said, "we could find ourselves and recruit ourselves to help. Since we now outrank ourselves—"

Ritter winced. "My God, Mannfried, don't make jokes about that. I don't even want to think about it."

Dr. Niedermann had been very emphatic: "If you succeed—"

"They will succeed," Himmler said sharply. "Have no doubt of that."

"If you succeed," Niedermann said again, not even looking at Himmler, "and if you survive, you may be tempted to try to make your way back to Germany. You must not, do you understand? The paradox effect, if you were to come in contact with your previous selves—"

"They know," Himmler said sharply. His face was slightly flushed; he was not accustomed to being ignored. Especially by elderly academics in shabby white jackets. "These men do not need you to tell them their duty. They understand the nature of the mission. They will do what is necessary." He looked at Ritter and Gruhn. "They are SS. They know how to die."

"So?" Dr. Niedermann didn't look particularly impressed. "No doubt they do. It is not, after all, an unusual skill. A great many people seem to be managing it these days."

Over by the door Skorzeny gave a massive rumbling chuckle.

Himmler's neck was fiery red by now, yet he said no more, only smiled a tight little smile. No doubt he was thinking of what awaited Dr. Niedermann once the transmission was done. There was no way the scientist could be allowed to live, not with the knowledge he carried in his head, not with the Russians practically on the doorstep.

"Well, then, gentlemen," Dr. Niedermann said, "who is to be first?"

"You realize," Gruhn said, "even now, if the Führer knew about this mission, our heads would roll. He still regards Mussolini as his friend."

Ritter turned around again and looked at him. "Now"? I should think so, Gruhn. *Now,* why should the Führer be unhappy with Il Duce? *Now,* things are going rather well for Germany, and if the Italians have not been very useful allies—"

"All right, all right." Gruhn held up a hand. "He *will* remain loyal to Mussolini to the end. Skorzeny told me—will tell me? *Ficke!*" he cried impatiently. "There is no language for this. You know what I meant to say."

"Yes," Ritter said. "I know."

He turned back around and looked again at his watch and then reached for the starter. Better get the engine warmed up; it was a truism that Il Duce was often late but never early, but in this country all the rules had exceptions.

The starter motor whined and complained for a couple of seconds before

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the engine fired, shaking the cab briefly, and then settled down to a sluggish idle. "Roll down your windows," he told Gruhn, and began rolling down his own. "This thing probably has a leaky muffler. Carbon monoxide poisoning, just what we need now."

The old Fiat was a ridiculous car for a job like this, but it had the supreme virtue of inconspicuousness. A better, faster automobile, sitting on a side street just off Il Duce's morning route, might have drawn attention; but even the two policemen who had walked by, a few minutes ago, had given the parked taxi only a single uninterested glance.

Ritter could see them now, over on the far side of the little piazza, keeping an eye on the handful of people who stood waiting on the sidewalk. Out-of-towners, Ritter guessed, hoping for a look at the Great Man; he spotted a couple of small children clutching little flags and bouquets of flowers. On this side of the piazza, though, there was no one in sight except for a pair of hurrying figures, dressed in flowing black, coming up the street. A priest, he saw now, and a nun. Half the people in this country seemed to be in religious orders.

He said, "Any time now. Be ready."

"I am ready," Gruhn said a bit stiffly. "*You* be ready. Yours is the difficult part—"

A sudden sharp tapping sound made them both jump. Ritter jerked around and saw that the priest was rapping with his knuckles on the right front door. The nun stood beside him, holding a large basket.

"Signore," the priest said, "a little offering for the poor?"

"No." Ritter shook his head vigorously. "No."

"Please, signore." The priest gestured at the nun's basket. "To buy bread for the orphans?"

"No." Ritter wanted to scream but he kept his voice down. He shook his head again and made go-away motions. "*Se ne vada.*"

"How uncharitable," the priest said, and pulled out a large pistol and pointed it at Ritter, while the nun reached into her basket and produced a submachine gun of a make Ritter didn't recognize, with a long thick cylinder where the muzzle should be. "Keep still, my son," the priest told Ritter. "Hands on the wheel."

Gruhn said, "*Scheisse*!" and started to move. The nun raised her odd-looking weapon. There was no sound except the rapid clatter of the bolt, but Gruhn grunted sharply and slumped back onto the seat.

The priest was already yanking the door open and sliding in beside Ritter, keeping the pistol trained. Without taking his eyes off Ritter he said, "Is he dead?"

It took Ritter a second to realize that the last words had been in English.

The nun was getting into the back seat and closing the door. "I think so," she said, also in English. "Shall I make sure?"

"Not necessary." The priest's eyebrows went up suddenly. "'*Scheisse*'?" he said. "Germans?"

Ritter nodded without thinking. The priest said, "How about that."

He was a big, broad-shouldered young man with dark curly hair and pale, rather delicate features. His hands were white and soft-looking, but he held the pistol in a solid competent grip, the muzzle dead steady. A .45 military automatic, Ritter saw, like the one he had taken off that American prisoner in the Ardennes before shooting him.

The priest, or whatever he was, said, "Speak English?"

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"No."

"So? Ina, shoot him in the back of the head."

Ritter's shoulders hunched involuntarily. The priest laughed. "Ah, yes. Never mind, Ina. Good," he said. "My German is terrible."

Across the piazza, the people on the sidewalk were craning their necks and staring up the avenue. The policemen continued to watch them. Evidently no one had noticed anything.

"Well, well," the priest said. "German time travelers, here to assassinate Il Duce. But why? What's the point?"

"Go to hell."

"Oh, come now. The game's up. Satisfy my curiosity, where's the harm in that? Look here," the priest said, "let's do a swap. You tell me why you've come to kill Mussolini, and I'll tell you if your mission succeeded."

Ritter stared at him. "You too? I mean—from the future?"

"Of course. A somewhat more distant future than yours."

Ritter's disbelief must have shown on his face. The priest said, "Think about it. How else would we know about you, except that we got here the same way?"

And, after a pause to let Ritter consider it: "So tell me, have we got a deal? Don't you want to know what finally happened to your country?"

Why not? "Mussolini," Ritter said, "is about to destroy everything. In a few more days he will make the decision to invade Greece."

"Greece? Whatever for?"

Ritter shrugged. "No good reason. A childish attempt to impress the Führer, I think. Anyway, it will be a disaster. The Greeks will beat the Italians and throw them back, with the help of the British. The Führer," Ritter said, "will find it necessary to intervene, lest the British turn this into a new front on the southeastern flank of the Reich, within bombing range of the Rumanian oil fields.

"Next spring," Ritter said, "the Wehrmacht will come down through the Balkans and overrun Greece. Unfortunately the Yugoslavs choose this time to be impossible. The whole affair takes much longer than it should. The—" He paused, searching for the word. "The timetable is disrupted. The invasion of Russia has to be put off for a month. Winter arrives and catches us still out on the steppes, with Moscow not taken and the conquest not complete. It is a very, very bad winter."

"And?"

"And," Ritter said, "in time, because of this, we lose the war. When we . . . left, the Russian tanks were already in the suburbs of Berlin."

The priest's face was almost comical to see; his eyes stared and his mouth hung slightly open. "Incredible," he said after a moment. "And yet it must be true. Why else would the Third Reich make such a ridiculous use of their greatest scientific discovery? Why else would Mussolini matter so much?"

"It answers a lot of questions," the nun said. "Still pretty damned hard to believe, though."

"We're here," the priest pointed out. "What could be harder to believe than that?"

Ritter said, "Now you tell me your part. Did we succeed?"

"Oh, yes. Very much so." The priest gestured with his free hand in the direction of the main avenue. "In the time we come from, history records that on the morning of October 10, 1940, Benito Mussolini was assassinated on

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his way from his home to his offices at the Palazzo Venezia, by two men who suddenly drove past his bodyguards in a stolen taxi and threw grenades into the back of his car. The two assassins were immediately gunned down by Il Duce's bodyguards. They have never been identified."

The nun said, "That's what the history books say where *we* come from. In a very considerable part of the world you'll read that the great Mussolini was murdered by terrorists from the international Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy."

It took Ritter a moment to analyze this. "We won?" he said dazedly.

"Oh, yes." Suddenly the man looked older; his shoulders sagged a little. "You won, all right. *How* you won. It took a few years, but after the defeat of Russia the outcome was never again in serious doubt."

"As of 1956," the woman said, "almost everything west of the Urals is ruled by the Reich or its allies. There are some Russian forces still at large in Siberia, but they do nothing but fight among themselves."

"I," Ritter said. "This, it—" His throat constricted; he struggled to speak. "England?" he asked.

"Still more or less free," the man said, "but neutralized. After half a dozen years of war, with no successes and the enemy still as strong as ever, the British people got tired of going hungry and doing without and seeing their men go off to get killed in Churchill's failed efforts. They turned the government out and the new PM let Berlin know he was ready to deal. They got pretty good terms, considering. Not even a German occupation, except for a couple of Luftwaffe bases. And a Gestapo liaison office in London, mostly to keep the press and the BBC in line."

He laughed suddenly. "What's funny, though," he said, "in view of what you just told us—you know the only country on the Continent that's kept its full independence? Greece. Seems Hitler rather admires them. Ancient warrior race, and all that."

"The Führer still lives?"

"Oh, yes. Alive and well, getting a little old but not perceptibly mellowing."

It was all too much to take in. Ritter said, "*Mein Gott.*"

"Your God, all right," the woman said. "Ours didn't come through for us so well. As usual."

The priest said something in a language Ritter didn't recognize, his voice sharp and angry. "Remember who you are," he added in English. "Even if you do look great in that super-*shikse* outfit."

A circuit closed in Ritter's mind. "*Juden?*"

"You were expecting maybe Ituri pygmies? Oh, I see, the outfits threw you off. Merely a useful disguise—after all, this *is* Rome. Religious types all over the place, many of them with foreign accents, nobody ever notices. Really, I'm surprised you didn't think of it.

Ritter was surprised too. It would have been perfect.

"Yes," the young man said, "I'm afraid your victory was a bit incomplete. You'll be disappointed to know that despite the best efforts of your countrymen and their friends, we haven't yet become extinct. Quite a few of us remain, especially in North America."

"Ah," Ritter said. "Americans."

"Geographically, yes. My colleague, behind you, is from Toronto. Her government would be most upset to know what she's doing. They've been at peace with the Reich for a long time now."

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"Your government wouldn't be too happy either," the woman said.

"America is still neutral?" Ritter asked. "In, ah, your time?"

The young man made a disgusted snorting noise. He sounded almost like Gruhn. "The United States," he said, "is still officially at war with Germany, but only because nobody's been willing to take the political risk of signing a peace treaty. There hasn't been any major action for years. The Germans aren't up to mounting an invasion—Hitler never has had any enthusiasm for amphibious operations, you know that. And the Reich is just too damn big and powerful to screw around with, especially now with the Caspian oil fields and the Volga tank factories all at full production. Now and then somebody's ship gets torpedoed, or there's a spy trial, and the Führer and President MacArthur make a lot of chest-thumping speeches, but it's all bullshit."

Ritter was getting confused. "But you," he said, "I mean, you're here—"

"Oh, I get it. You thought we were on some kind of military mission? No, no," the man said. "Nothing like that. We represent . . . a consortium, you might say."

"Jews?"

Both of them laughed out loud. "That part really gets you, doesn't it?" the woman said.

"Actually," the man said, "the group we represent is fairly ecumenical in all senses of the word. But yes, I'm afraid there are a good many of us subhumans involved. Especially at the scientific end. You know," he said, "degenerate Jewish science and all that."

"Dr. Einstein did the original theoretical work," the woman added.

"Yes." The man's lips twitched downward. "Dr. Einstein hasn't been listened to very closely in official circles, since a little experiment based on his theories somehow turned most of the University of Chicago campus into a large smoking crater. Luckily there were others, in what you might call the private sector, who still appreciated the good Doctor's ideas."

Ritter had never heard of Einstein, but he didn't say so. He said, "Then you didn't use Dr. Niedermann's invention?"

"Niedermann? Can't say I've heard of him," the man said. "He was the one who made the breakthrough in your own time?"

"Yes."

"And you did say you were losing the war when you left. So I'm guessing this was a last-minute thing, developed under the pressure of desperation?"

Ritter nodded. "Well, there you are, then," the man said. "If Germany went on to win the war by conventional means—thanks to your own heroic efforts here today—then there wouldn't have been any particular need for bizarre research projects. Most likely your Dr. Niedermann would have been dismissed as a crank."

True enough, Ritter reflected. In fact Niedermann had been in serious trouble, as being politically unreliable, and had only been saved from arrest by Himmler's sudden obsession with bizarre scientific—and not so scientific—secret projects.

"The original idea," the woman said, "was to send a team back to kill Hitler. There was a lot of debate about that. Dr. Einstein didn't like the idea of deliberate assassination at all, but nobody could suggest a better use for the device. Then, while the equipment was being calibrated, some anomalies turned up in the field. Eventually it was determined that someone in the past had already made such a transit."

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"Which," the man said dryly, "came as a considerable shock. Especially when the details became clear. Two men leaving northern Germany on April 28, 1945? And materializing in Rome on this particular day in 1940? No one could imagine what the connection might be, yet obviously it must be something of supreme importance to cause the Reich to play its last hole card."

He made a little gesture with his free hand. "And so here we are. It was a great gamble sending us—oh, you should have heard the arguments, white-haired scientists and distinguished scholars screaming at each other like drunk truck drivers, this came so close to never happening and frankly even when I stepped into the accelerator I was more than half convinced the whole thing was insane—but they were right. Here we are and here you are, about to change the world, about to save the fortunes of the Third Reich, the most important assassination since the Archduke Ferdinand."

Ritter only half heard the last words. "We won," he said again, almost whispering. "Will win."

"Absolutely. Only of course," the man said, "you won't, now. Because you aren't going to kill Mussolini after all, now we're here. One temporal rearrangement cancels another. Fascinating, huh?"

Ritter's peripheral vision registered movement. He looked past the young man's face, out through the open window of the cab and across the little piazza, where the group of onlookers had begun to move excitedly forward. One of the policemen stood at the curb, hands up, motioning them back. The other was staring up the street, shading his eyes with one hand.

The bogus priest raised his big pistol slightly. "Shall I kill you?" he said. His voice was casual; he might have been offering Ritter a smoke. "I don't suppose it matters, really. I'm sure you're on a suicide mission. They'd hardly risk letting you hang around back here afterward, not with what you know—not to mention the paradox factor. If you've got a poison capsule or something that you want to use, go ahead. Or would you prefer I shoot you?"

"If you fire that thing," Ritter said, "you'll never get away."

"But I'll never get away anyway," the man said cheerfully. "Don't you get it? As soon as I kill you, that's it for your mission. The future changes back to what it was, and therefore I'm not here. Neither of us will be here."

He leaned back, smiling at Ritter. "You see, we're both the children of refugees from Nazi Europe. Ina's father got out of Spain a week before Franco knuckled under to Hitler and started shipping Spanish Jews off to the camps. He met her mother on the boat to New York. My parents were both born here in Italy, but they met in a refugee camp in Illinois. So," he said, "once your mission fails, we no longer exist. Because we never will."

"I wonder what it's going to feel like, winking out like that," the woman said. "If there's any feeling at all. It should be an interesting experience."

Down at the corner, another pair of *carabinieri* had appeared and were taking up station in the middle of the side street, ready to block any traffic from the avenue until Il Duce had passed.

The young man said, "It appears that the great one approaches. Okay, then—"

Suddenly there was a commotion in the back seat, a muffled cry from the woman and the rattle of the silenced machine pistol. The man beside Ritter started to turn, but then Gruhn came lunging across the seat back, grabbing the big .45 in both hands and forcing it downward. "Go," he yelled to Ritter. His face was covered with blood. "I got the Jew bitch."

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Ritter was already reaching for the gearshift. "Hurry," Gruhn said, struggling to hold the pistol down against the seat. "We can still—"

The young man hit Gruhn on the back of the neck with the edge of his free hand. Gruhn went limp, sagging across the seat back. Ritter had the car in gear and moving by now, accelerating hard down the narrow street. The two carabinieri turned and held up their hands and then, seeing the taxi wasn't stopping, started to unsling their weapons.

Beside him, the young man was having trouble getting his gun free from Gruhn's unconscious grasp. Ritter clenched his teeth and kept going, flooring the gas pedal, thinking there was no chance at all, but you had to try. Maybe ram Mussolini's car—

The young man said, "What the hell," and let go the gun and reached over and gave the wheel a sharp yank. Caught by surprise, Ritter tried to straighten out again, but it was too late. The taxi bucked violently as the front wheels banged up over the curb. The marble façade of an office building appeared over the hood.

Just before the impact Ritter heard the young man say, "Heil Hitler, asshole."

Benito Mussolini said, "Why have we stopped?"

It was the fourth time he had said it in the last few minutes. He was shifting restlessly, irritably, in the back seat of the big black Lancia Astura, looking this way and that.

In the front seat Ercole Boratto, his long-time chauffeur, said once again, "I don't know, Duce."

Mussolini craned his neck, trying to see past the car that blocked the street just ahead. A couple of his bodyguards stood beside it, weapons at the ready. The others had already fanned out and disappeared up the street. Another car like it sat a little way behind the Astura.

"I can't see a thing," Mussolini said peevishly.

Boratto turned and glanced back at him. "Duce, I really wish you'd get down until we know what's happening. With respect, you are very exposed."

"That would be a fine thing, wouldn't it? What an inspiring leader I'd be, groveling on the floor of my own car in fear of some imaginary assassins."

Boratto sighed and went back to watching the street, keeping his hand on the pistol on his lap.

"Aha," Mussolini said a few minutes later. The head of the bodyguard detachment had reappeared at last, walking back down the middle of the street. With him was an officer of the carabinieri. "Now," Mussolini said, "maybe we'll get some answers. Ercole, go find out what this nonsense is all about."

Boratto started to protest. Mussolini said gently, "Ercole, I gave you an order."

Looking very unhappy—Mussolini smothered a laugh—Boratto got out of the car, still holding his pistol, and walked up the street. Mussolini watched as he talked with the two men. By now more of the bodyguards were coming back.

When Boratto returned his face was a good deal clearer. "It seems to have been a false alarm, Duce," he reported, climbing back into the car. "An automobile wreck. A taxi crashed into a building."

"Oh, yes, our famous Roman taxis." Mussolini made a face. "The most dangerous machines known to man. Even our German friends have noth-

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ing so terrifying. I should send some of them to Africa to help Graziani. Was anyone injured?"

"There seem to be two bodies in the car, Duce," Boratto said. "The police are still trying to pry the doors open. It's pretty badly smashed."

"Probably drunk," Mussolini said contemptuously. "Alcohol is a terrible thing, Ercole. As you know, I never drink it. A pledge I made to my dear wife, many years ago."

"Yes, Duce."

"Consider, Ercole," Mussolini went on. "Who are the two most powerful leaders in the world today? Chancellor Hitler and myself, of course. And neither of us drinks."

He leaned back in the seat, watching the bodyguards piling into their car. "Well, at least the boys got a little exercise. So silly, Ercole. I know my destiny," he said. "I will never be killed by bullets."

He flapped a hand. "Drive on, Ercole. *Andiamo.*" ○

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JAMIE SAYS

Louise Marley

Louise Marley is a classical concert and opera singer who has published five science fiction novels. *The Glass Harmonica* was a recent co-winner of the Endeavour Award, and *The Terrorists of Irustan* was named one of the best novels of 1999 by *Voya Magazine*. The author's first hardcover, *The Maquisarde*, is just out from Ace Books. Ms. Marley lives in Redmond, Washington, with her husband and son.

Jamie remembers what it was like before they left.

Not me. I was just a baby in dities, sucking my thumb and sleeping in a crib. But Jamie remembers, and he tells about it at night when we're all in the sleeping porch. He's a good storyteller, Jamie. Sometimes while he's talking, the curtains over the window—those ones with bitty flowers on them that used to be pink but now are kinda brown—the curtains move like skirts in the wind, like maybe they came back. They didn't, though.

Of course he's not supposed to talk about it. Nobody's supposed to talk about it. When the dads talk about it, they whisper, and you have to listen really hard, hiding behind the chute to the soymax silo or ducking down under the conkey trough. If the dads heard what Jamie says, he'd get a whipping, probably. You can get a whipping for a lot less than telling a few stories. So Jamie tells about it when the dads aren't around.

I'm glad Jamie talks about it. My own dad doesn't talk. I mean, he doesn't talk at all. Jamie says he used to, before, but now he doesn't. I don't remember ever hearing his voice.

The dads say there'll be more coming. They always say that, but the only ones who ever get off the shuttles when they come to pick up the soymax are the company officers, come to give orders and tell the dads where to put stuff and to check on the soil and stuff. Still, the dads say, More have to be coming, or what'll happen to these boys? And, They gotta do something.

I don't know anything about them, except what Jamie says, and I don't know whether to believe him or not. I don't remember anything.

Jamie says they're soft. The dads are hard, arms and thighs and hands and faces. Their muscles are like fists all over, no give to them. The dads are like the conkeys, the animals they catch in the hills and train to pull the plows. They keep their heads down all the time, working, fighting, cooking, smacking us boys if we act bad.

I'd like to cook. I think I will, when I'm big. I like food, the way it looks and how it feels in your hands, slippery beets and crumbly potatoes and the mushy zooky that grows wild near the pond behind the barns. The dads yell at you if you squish food with your fingers. They yell things like, I spent an hour cooking that and you're not going to play with it, dammit. I'd like to

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mix the foods together in different ways, try the zooky with the tomatoes or put some of the soymax with the beets. Jamie says they did that, when they were here, they cooked different things, mixed them up, made them look nice. The dads just fry everything with hog sausage. Of course, they're busy, the dads, because they have to do everything themselves, work in the fields, wash the clothes, clean the houses, take care of us boys.

There aren't that many boys now. One by one, they're getting big and moving out of the sleeping porch. I'm worried Jamie will move out soon, too. I'm the youngest. I was the last before they left. And I don't want to sleep by myself.

Jamie says they smelled different than the dads do, even if they'd been out working in the gardens. The dads smell like dirt and sweat and sunshine. Jamie says they smelled like soap and flowers and sometimes honey. Jamie says they used to bend down to talk to you, right into your face, no matter how low to the ground you were. Jamie says they were always hurrying around bringing you things and wiping your face and telling you what to eat and what not to eat. Jamie says they used to pick you up and hug you real tight.

And Jamie says they used to tell stories about Home. Jamie can't tell about Home, because he was born here, but he remembers stuff they said. Mostly it was stuff about clothes and babies and houses. Schools they used to go to. Jobs they got to do. People they knew. And Jamie says they would cry, and hug each other.

I don't remember hugging. The dads pat your head, or put their hard hands on your shoulder and say things like, How you doin' sport, or Hey, aren't you getting big now. But if you try to hug another person, arms around and tummies touching, the dads get that afraid look on their faces, and their voices get loud and they invent chores that need to be done Right Now.

Jamie says the dads laughed a lot more before they left. They fought more, too, he says, but it was different. They still fight, like some of us do on the sleeping porch when it gets hot and we feel cranky. It's scary when the dads fight, though, real quiet and mean. One dad got killed from fighting. Jamie says the dads used to fight more with their words and less with their fists. And Jamie says they would come running out of the houses then, calling out, talking a lot. They would make the dads stop fighting, and then they would bring out extra food or things to drink, and pretty soon everybody would be laughing and not mad.

Jamie says there used to be special days when nobody did any chores, except for them of course, special days when there would be lots of special food, put out on pretty plates, and they would sing songs and laugh as if that same old work they did every day were a lot easier on the special day. Jamie says they always remembered when each person was born, and gave them a special day every year to remember it. I guess the dads forgot those days because they're so busy. I don't know what my day is exactly.

Sometimes Jamie tells about sex, but I don't know if I believe him about that. Of course we see the conkeys and the goats and the pigs mating, but Jamie says it's not the same at all. Well, it can't be the same, can it, because the animals have two kinds each. We only have the dads and the boys. So how could Jamie know about sex? He's only seven years older than me.

There was that time when two of the dads went off by themselves. The other dads went after them. That was a big fight, and those two got whipped good, with the reverend there watching, and saying, Next time it'll be worse.

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As far as us boys know, there wasn't any Next time. I asked Jamie what it was about, and he said, Shut up, stupid, or you'll get a whipping too.

I'm scared of the reverend. He teaches us to read and write and about numbers and stuff three times a week. But I'm afraid he'll stand and watch sometime when I get a whipping. I don't always know when I do something to get me a whipping. I'm always afraid Next time it'll be worse.

A message came yesterday about the shuttle coming. The overseer read it on the loudspeaker. The dads in our house were arguing after, and somebody said, Let's vote, and somebody else said, Who gives a shit about a vote, I'm leaving.

Jamie says they voted, before they left, but I don't think he knows what he's talking about. If they voted, and it was a secret, why would they let a little boy know about it? Jamie says they were screaming at each other because some wanted to stay and some wanted to go. But he was a little boy then. If I was just a baby in dities, Jamie couldn't of been more than eight. And if a little boy knew they were voting, wouldn't the dads have known? But I don't argue with Jamie. Last time I argued, he hauled off and popped me one on the head with his fist, and it hurt. I bawled. The dad who was around told me to stop crying, because boys aren't supposed to cry.

Jamie says they used to cry a lot, but it didn't do them any good.

So the shuttle came yesterday. There was one of them on it, only she didn't stay. I'm pretty sure she wouldn't have liked it here, anyway.

The reverend let us go out and see the shuttle come in. The dads and the bigger boys, like Jamie, had the landing strip cleaned up and weeded and a new coat of tar spread on it. The shuttle is bigger than any plow or wagon, and it makes a noise that comes in through your ears and fills your head right to the brim. I wanted to cry from it, but my own dad was standing right beside me, not saying anything like always. I didn't want him to see me bawling, so I put my hands in my pockets and held on to my dingle, real tight. That always keeps me from crying.

Jamie told me they don't have dingles. I can't say if that's true, but I know they have bings, like he said, because even through her black uniform-thing, I could see her bings, and they weren't anything like the goats' udders or the sows' teats. They were sort of rounded, with a little point on the end. I couldn't stop staring at them.

The dads didn't stare at her bings. They hardly looked at her at all. They just looked at the men that got off the shuttle, men in the same uniform-things. I thought the shuttle just came to bring us more medicines for the cabinets and some more seeds and tools and stuff, but the men in the black uniform-things went into the overseer's house and several of the dads went with them. She did too. My own dad went in there, too, even though he never talks, so I got to stay outside waiting. I heard yelling and shouting, but I don't think my own dad did any of that. It didn't sound like anybody hit anybody else. After a long time, almost supper-time, they all came out again. That was when I got to hear her voice.

Jamie never said about their voices.

Her voice was real clear, and high, like when you hear one of the biddy-birds call in the early morning when all the animals are quiet and the wind has died down and none of the dads are snoring. It was sweet, too, even though she was saying something mean. Her voice was like the sound the goat's milk makes when it hits your bucket, or like the crick falling over the

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little dam behind the hog pasture. But her words were hard, like the stones that made the dam.

She said, I don't know what you expected, changing the rules like that. How would you like it if the company changed the rules on you? And then she said, They had every right to leave. I would have left. One of the dads said something to her, and she said, Anyway, it's not the company's responsibility. I couldn't understand the dads' voices, but hers was higher, and it was easy to hear. She said, We're only the transport and supply, and how you choose to run your settlement is up to you. Even if you wanted to make slaves out of half your people, there was nothing we could do. It's in the contract. Another voice said something, and then she laughed. She said, Don't tell us your problems. She said, This is business.

I was still waiting for my own dad to come out, and I stared at her as she walked out of the overseer's house. She made shorter steps than the men, but faster ones. Her waist was small, and her skin, up close, looked smooth and sort of cushiony. I wanted to touch her.

She slowed her quick steps, just a little, and I looked up, and she looked down. Her lips were shiny, and her eyes were real clear. She hesitated, and her eyes got kind of soft, and her lips parted like maybe she was going to speak to me. My mouth was hanging wide open, I know because my tongue got dry. I thought she might bend down to speak to me, like Jamie said they used to do. But she closed her shiny lips, sort of folded them together, and walked on past me. One of the dads near me said, Why don't you shut your yap, you look like an idiot, and so I did. A moment later my own dad came out of the overseer's house and we went on to our own house with all the other dads and boys who share with us. We had to eat a cold supper that night because no one had thought about cooking.

Jamie says his own dad told him she—the one from the shuttle—is a Bitch. I don't know what that is.

I'm pretending she was my mother, who just couldn't help herself from coming back to see me. I took some twigs from the wood where the hogs root and made a doll, with a scrap of an old dishtowel for a skirt, like Jamie says they used to wear. The reason I know about skirts is, I found two of them in the attic of our house. Anyway, I couldn't figure out how to make the uniform-thing, and besides, if she was my mother, she must have worn skirts when she lived in our house. I have to hide the doll, because I don't want the dads laughing at me. Of course I know it's not real. I'm not a baby anymore. But I'm pretending.

None of the dads were around yesterday, and Jamie says they were having the vote over at the overseer's house. Jamie says they were voting about whether to give the company the crop or not, if the company didn't bring some more of them on the shuttle. This morning I heard somebody say The company doesn't need the soymax that much, and then somebody else said Then why did they spend all that money bringing us here? And somebody else said, There's plenty of people would come and work this land.

Jamie says this is the only place growing soymax and they need it at Home. There was something wrong with the dirt at Home. Something bad got in it and they couldn't get it out.

Jamie says the vote ended up being a fistfight in the yard behind the overseer's house.

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It looks like Jamie was right, because his dad came home with a black eye and a swollen lip and another dad from our house has a broken nose. They yelled at us boys and told us to go to bed.

I snuck my doll out from under my bed and hugged it under the covers, then held my dingle real tight, but still I couldn't help crying. I bawled under my pillow till I finally fell asleep. My face is all swoll this morning.

Jamie says there were young ones in our house, too, before they left. Girls. I asked if girls have bings, and he says no, not till they get grown-up. I asked when they get grown-up, and he popped me one on the head and said, When they get bings, you stupid. I was going to cry, but then Jamie said, That was one of the problems, and one of the other boys said, What was, and Jamie said, There weren't enough grown-ups, and the dads started on the girls who didn't have bings yet. The boy asked, What does that mean, and Jamie said, It means sex, you stupid. Someone said, What were the other problems, and Jamie said, I don't know, Bitches are stupid, that's a problem. Another boy said, What happened to the girls from our house, and Jamie said, They took them away when they left. It was real quiet on the sleeping porch after that, and I forgot about crying even though my head stung where Jamie popped me.

Jamie says before they left there were a lot more houses, and only a few people lived in each one. I took my doll and set out past the fields to see if there were more houses. I found some chimneys, with vines and tree saplings growing all around them. The houses must have been real small, maybe only one or two rooms. The houses got burnt, probably, because the chimneys were black and there were some bits of wall and stuff here and there. It took a long time to walk there, and then I wandered around with my doll, setting her up in this house and that, seeing if she liked any of them. If she did, I couldn't tell. I was real late getting back. It was bedtime and I missed supper, but I didn't get in trouble. None of the dads noticed I was gone. Jamie did, though, and he looked real worried when I came into the sleeping porch. Then he looked mad. I thought he was going to pop me, but then I looked again, and I thought maybe he was going to bawl instead. Jamie says not to go off like that again unless I tell him.

Jamie found my doll.

He was cleaning the sleeping porch and he stuck his broom under my bed and swept it out. He stood there, holding it in his hand. I started to bawl, and I waited for him to pop me on the head, but he didn't. He looked at me for a while, and then he just put my doll back under my bed and went to sweep somewhere else.

Jamie says the company told the overseer they couldn't get any more of them to come. Jamie says the story is all over the company, and all over Home, about how they left, and they can't get any more to come.

There were a lot of fights after that. It seemed like all the dads wore bruises or cuts or peered out of blackened eyes. Suppers were real quiet. Jamie says one of the dads in the other houses hanged himself with a rope in the small barn, just like . . . and then he glanced at me, right at me, and he stopped talking.

I asked Jamie why he didn't finish, and he said, Shut up, stupid.

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One of the other boys said, Just like what, Jamie? And Jamie said, Just like nothing.

I had a bad feeling then. As soon as it was dark, I got my doll out from under my bed and held it under the covers.

Jamie says the trouble all started with voting. Jamie says there were too many men, and what did the stupid Bitches expect them to do? And so the reverend talked and the men voted. They voted to put things right, Jamie says, to return to the Old Ways. I said, What are the Old Ways? and Jamie said, Not the New Ways.

And, Jamie says, they wanted to vote, like they used to at Home, but the men didn't let them, because they're too stupid. They won't vote the right way.

The one from the shuttle didn't look stupid to me.

The dads are taking another vote, Jamie says. Jamie says some of the dads want to leave on the shuttle and go after them, but if they do that, then they all have to go, because the company will have to bring in other settlers who have their own rules. We would all have to go. All the dads and all the boys. But we have to leave the conkeys and the ploughs and the hogs.

I waited until the sleeping porch was quiet, and then I crept up to Jamie's bed and touched his shoulder. He woke right away. Or maybe he wasn't asleep. He turned his head to look at me.

I whispered, real quiet, Will I find my mother then, Jamie?

Jamie raised himself on an elbow and reached out with the other hand and laid it on my shoulder. I saw he was getting a beard, just like the dads. But his hand was nice, warm, not heavy or hard. And he said, No, boy, you won't find your mother. Your mother's dead.

And I said, Are you sure, Jamie? And I started to bawl.

And his face got all tight and his voice got real rough and he said, Listen, boy, your mother hanged herself in the small barn when you were still in dities. And your little sister with her. And the rest of them said, It was the last straw.

Why, Jamie, why did she do it? I wanted to ask, but the words wouldn't come out of my mouth. I just bawled. Jamie's eyes went all dark and glisteny in the night.

And Jamie said, She couldn't help it. None of them could. And they all had to go, because if some stayed behind, it would be terrible for the ones who stayed. So they voted, and then they took the ones who didn't want to go, and they took the girls, and they went off in the shuttle when all the dads were out in the fields. And the dads came back and found us boys alone. And your own dad didn't talk after that.

I didn't bawl any more. I went back to bed. I hid under the covers, holding my dingle real tight. I left my doll where it was. I didn't want to pretend with it anymore.

About two weeks later I pulled the doll out from under the bed. It was all covered with dust. It looked real stupid in its scrap of skirt. It looked like a Bitch.

I took the stupid doll to the burn pile and dropped it on the fire. It burned right up, yellow and red and orange, and then it turned all black and ashy. You couldn't even tell what it used to be. O

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FREE FLOATERS

Brenda Cooper and Larry Niven

Illustration by Michael Carroll

Brenda Cooper lives in Kirkland, Washington, and is the information technology director for the city. She also hosts the "Space and Science" and "Science Fiction" sections of Futurist.com, and periodically does public speaking about the future. Ms. Cooper has a twenty-two-year-old son who is a wildland firefighter. The author has published collaborative stories with Larry Niven in *Analog* and *Asimov's*, and sold a fantasy story to Mercedes Lackey.

Hugo- and Nebula-award-winning author Larry Niven's most recent novels include *The Burning City* with Jerry Pournelle (Simon & Schuster, March 2000) and *Saturn's Race* with Steven Barnes (TOR, May 2000). Forthcoming books are *Burning Tower* with Jerry Pournelle (Simon & Schuster), *Ringworld's Child* (Del Rey), and *Generation Gap* (working title) with Brenda Cooper. He tells us "Other work clamors to be written, as if I had the time. Greg Benford has challenged me to return to short stories. I've since done ten, including three with Brenda Cooper. I expect to be first in print with a solution to the Dark Matter problem."

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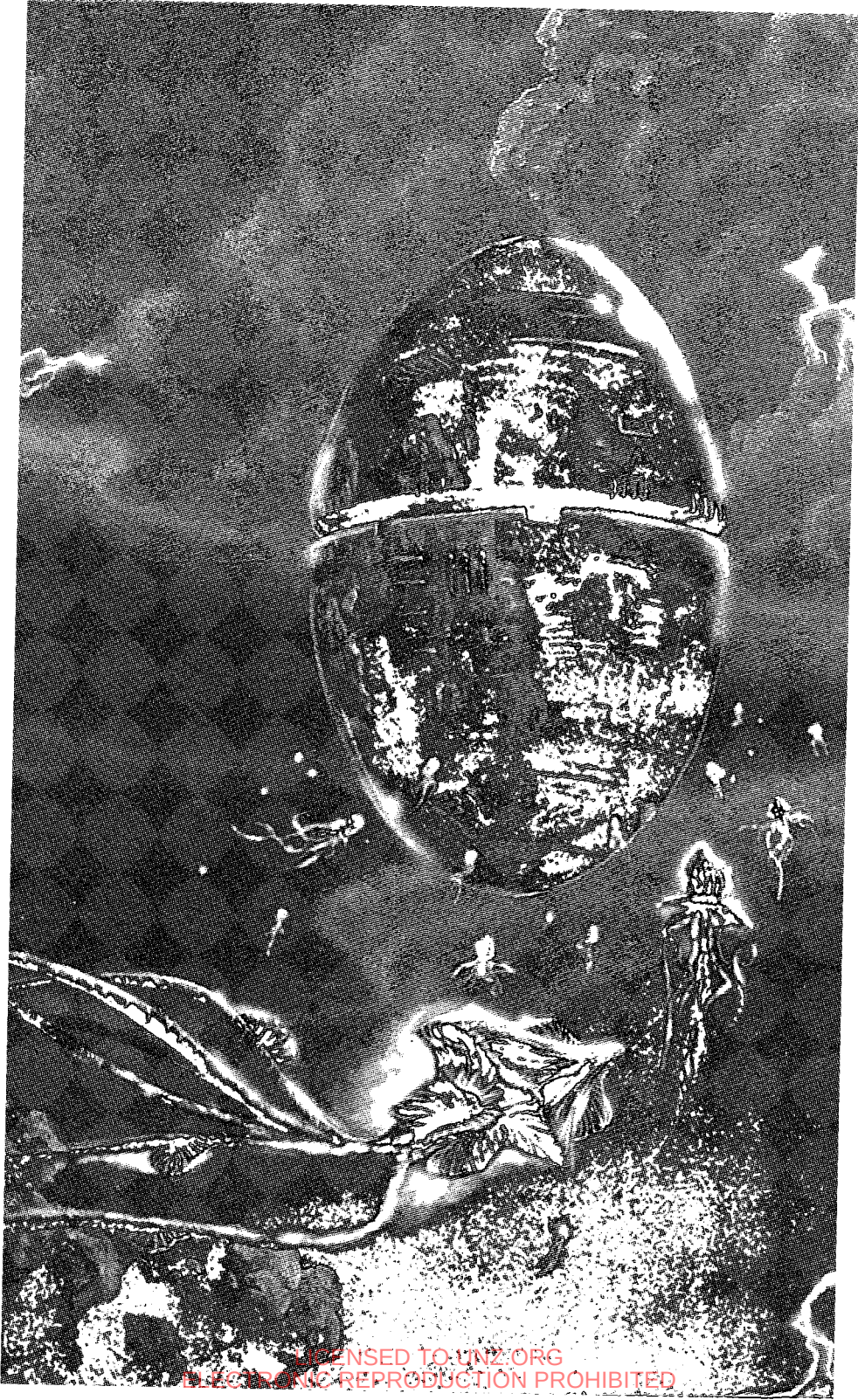

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He'd been told years ago that flying into a major Empire station under power was a declaration of war. Eric had to take the ship's boat halfway to (Chksh)-Wenshee Station, leaving *Pair O' Deuces* in wide orbit, in Kimber's care. The station would send a tug and tow him in.

The small boat, *Jack of Eagles,* was little more than a box with a clear front window, room for four seats (a bit cramped) the Pillbug docking system, and a light fusion engine. Eric had figured out how to add fuel tanks, losing two seats and some acceleration. The boat was all of human manufacture, though its belly—the docking system—was shaped to Pillbug specs.

Eric watched the unfamiliar star pattern Kimber had dubbed "the Joker Nebula." Red dwarf stars made mad misplaced slanted eyes; a twisted glowing line for a reddish orange grin, a wisp of green-lit gas above the eyes. He picked out details while he waited. That dark blotch off center might be taken for a bat—

The tug that drifted out of the Joker was a flat plate, windowless and featureless. It was marked with the interspecies "Don't Touch" symbol, which looked like a proofreader's takeout mark and glowed like a neon bar sign. Eric released *Jack of Eagles'* controls and watched the tug disappear under *Eagles'* belly. It mated to the underside with a barely sensed click.

Eagles surged.

(Chksh)-Wenshee Station grew from a naked-eye speck in the Joker to an irregular jumble of masses. A stalk sprouted from one side, like a ripe dandelion. That would be the Domain. It grew to a shimmering bubble big enough to engulf a moon.

His nose was almost touching the window. *I must look like a kid*, he thought. But this station was a legend.

Transparencies resolved inside the larger transparency. Thousands of tiny habitats clung to the basic spheroid, multicolored, some ringed with lights, some flashing, some opaque silver to benefit an agoraphobic species. The habitats brushed gently against and past each other, changing their shapes to accommodate. It looked like soapy foam.

They weren't all small. One bubble held hundreds of individuals all the same shape, though he couldn't identify the species. Nearer now, he watched two bubbles merge, saw figures inside them drift toward each other and touch. Tinier bubbles changed shape as they crawled through the mass.

Then (Chksh)-Wenshee Station rotated around and his view was blocked by cargo bays and spacecraft. Eric relaxed into his chair and watched. He passed between two huge ships—one as featureless as the hatbox shape he and Kimber had flown to Trine ten years ago, the other festooned with equipment and attitude jets . . . and what might be weapons. . . . More ships, tens of ships, and only three of them types he recognized.

Now he passed bulky cargo ships and containers. Many of them were marked with the "Don't Touch," symbol. One of those containers was his to take. He lost a game of guess-which-one to himself.

It had been two years since he was in so populous a place; six years since he and Kimber had been home on Earth. He was in love with the view. It was like visiting the Emerald City.

Jack of Eagles settled among connector cables agile as snakes. Eric felt the click; he saw the tug drift away. (Chksh)-Wenshee Station had docked him.

A ribbon of gold sidewalk snaked up to *Jack of Eagles'* airlock. He stepped

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onto it and found gravity, not much. Martian or less. The ribbon carried him away.

It looped and curved and joined other gold ribbons in a maze that twisted through three dimensions of cargo space. More ships: fascinating shapes. Where the paths forked the flow of the ribbon made his decisions for him. He'd never seen this exact system, but it wasn't that different from other stations. And now he'd reached the base of a vertical pillar, turned a right angle, and was on it, riding upward.

There was precious little of free will in this place, he thought impatiently. He started walking, and the flow speeded up.

Life forms streamed past him, up and down the pillar. One multi-legged citizen was running but not moving, using the system for exercise. The sphere grew to a world, and then his path turned again, and he was standing on the surface.

He'd heard stories. He knew what to do next. He walked at the froth of habitats, ignored by their occupants. He pushed into a wall and his own habitat formed around him.

The Joker Nebula grinned down through the curve of ceiling. The walls were shallow curves at odd angles. Now what? He was in a bubble. The broker he'd come to meet was in another, somewhere out there.

He looked for controls. Nothing. He pushed around with his hands. Still nothing. How would they do this? What technology provided options? There was furniture in some of the other bubbles.

Verbal? He said, "(Chksh)-Wenshee Station Control, please. Language English."

It rose from the floor: a silver pillar, waist high. It asked, "Your desire?" in a voice the match of his own.

He had put it in an outer pocket of his travel suit, a card engraved with da Vinci's sketch of a man. It was a meticulous description of the needs of human physiology, given pale UV-sensitive skin and allergies to penicillin, cat hair, and macadamia nuts. He showed it to the pillar. A laser winked at it.

Gravity and pressure changed. He opened his helmet, breathed. It worked. Magic. These moments always made him feel small, invoked awe.

This could be fun! He ran his fingers through his hair to get out the helmet-clumps. He'd shaved. Eh, what would an alien notice? Good thing he'd bathed, though. Kimber usually did the negotiations.

"Guide me." He'd been given a number code: the broker's address. He recited it. Ripples of light ran across the floor, and he followed the ripples.

He tried to watch in all directions at once; caught himself. He must look like what he was, a tourist. But some were watching him, if those were eyes, and the shy ones had opaqued their habitats. Kimber would have said it was the one thing all these life forms had in common. They'd come to *see* . . . perceive, she would have said . . . to perceive the universe.

So Eric looked back.

Six indescribable shapes dissected a shape different from their own, behind a wall like dark glass. Blood dripped like yellow paint and disappeared when it hit the floor. Banquet? Eric was nauseated.

Black wall, black wall. Rainbow wall, and a flow of shadows that hurt to look at. Then a wide floor-to-ceiling window, and two tremendous creatures wrestling in front of an audience. Wrestling, or mating? They didn't look like

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the same species. A small individual brushed them with a yellow laser dot, and they broke the pose.

Wrestling.

He saw a dozen centaur-like citizens turn from a discussion, looking up. He followed their gaze.

A monstrous bulk pulled loose from the cargo bay, a ship the size of a city. The whole station quivered. A tiny arrowhead eased past it, surely a ship's boat like his and Kimber's *Pair O' Deuces*. Everybody's a tourist. . . .

The ripple in the floor changed its pattern. There, straight ahead of him, seen through a wall like wavy glass: a spidery creature and a smaller . . . hominid . . . human? The spider's shoulders extended into a black clump—too small for a head—a sense cluster. It looked like the pictures: a Hyunpa.

The human beckoned. Eric waved back.

His habitat bumped against the other, clung, and then the invisible barrier popped. His ears popped too, pressure change, and they were all in one large bubble.

The Hyunpa bowed its head. Keep an open mind, but that extended sense cluster was still a head. No mouth. He couldn't see its lower body. That was blocked by a brick shape with stuff on it: a desk. Long multi-jointed arms rested on the desk.

The woman sat in lotus position on a sage-green cushion, below her boss's level. At least the Hyunpa thought this meeting important enough to have a same-species assist. But what should he do next?

The woman saw his problem. "Take something from the server, taste, then introduce yourself."

That was an unspeakable relief. He asked, "Server?"

The silver pillar had followed him, but now the desk lit in bright orange crawling with black graffiti. Eric saw what she meant. The desk was a server, was his *host's* server, and to use his own would be seen as mistrust.

Eric showed it his da Vinci cardkey. The graffiti changed to English. Eric studied his choices.

Many races needed diet supplements. Supplements could be vital to trade, peace talks, settlements of succession in an empire or corporation. Some supplements increased intelligence or wariness, others suppressed a natural paranoia or a mindless coming-into-season. Drug laws would be impossible at an interspecies meetpoint, and alcohol was the least of what a server could make available to a human.

Most of Eric's choices were for recreational substances. The coffee bean: no! Aliens wouldn't brew decent coffee. He chose crossed hops leaves. A window opened with a drinking bulb, frothy and bitter smelling, like a micro-brew.

He tasted it. Perfect. Fermented? In the server? But the server knew what it had given him; its monitors would prevent even voluntary poisoning.

"Introduce yourself," the woman reminded him.

She had red hair down to her waist, eyes such a deep blue they had to be tinted, freckles that looked real on creamy skin. She was younger than he was, fresher. She was the first human woman he'd seen in nearly two years, barring Kimber, and she was stunning. Her scent reminded him of ocean froth and salty wind, and fresh cut grass . . . but that would be the Hyunpa. Eric tore his eyes away from her to bow to the broker.

"I'm Eric Keenan. I'm here for information and supplies for the Pyth project on Baent."

The woman turned toward the Hyunpa and spoke to it, high trilling

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sounds and a complex whistle. He only understood two words: his name. She cocked her head and listened carefully to the reply, then turned to Eric.

"You may call me Safe-Dealer-in-Goods. My use-name is"—a high trill, fast, it hurt his ears a little—"but even Martianne does not speak it properly. Your reputation precedes you, Eric Keenan."

How was he supposed to take that? He was relieved when the woman continued. "Allow me to introduce my translator, Martianne. She will assist you when we have completed our business. I submit a manifest listing all items we believe you will need to complete your survey." The desktop displayed a list in English of somewhat whimsical grammar. "There are also optional items, and Martianne will help you choose from among those. She has some knowledge of survey teams herself."

"I am much relieved," Eric said.

"Are you familiar with free floaters?"

"Only with the concept," Eric said. "We find massive planets not associated with any star, five to thirty times as large as our own Jupiter. We of Earth don't know if chaos and gravity flung them—" He stopped. The alien was speaking.

Martianne said, "Worlds form where space grows dense, usually in strings within clusters, where mass points in the local neighborhood guide the interstellar winds into a stream rather than a whorl. In the Orion Nebula, we find free-floating superjovians, twenty-six and counting, all a few million years old. We find also an intruder of mass five point six Jupiters, age three to four billion Earth years, formed elsewhere and gravitationally captured. We have made contact with tool users in its atmosphere."

"In—" Eric chopped it off. Their instructions had spoken of a free floater planet, but he'd been picturing Baent as a black moon, otherwise roughly Earthlike, circling a bigger version of Jupiter or Saturn. Baent was the floater itself?

No species he knew of lived inside a gas giant. In the face of Martianne's amusement he considered what question would make him look least foolish . . . then discarded that notion. When he faced Kimber, he'd better have the data they needed.

He asked, "Are *we* to make contact? Why choose humans?"

"Of intelligent species, most cannot leave the locality they evolved in, cannot even claim most of their own world. Of space travelers, most have not evolved to speak to minds unlike their own. You seek out strangers. So does my own species, called—" The alien voice skirled like a bagpipe; Martianne said, "Hyunpa. It was I who was called to broker an agreement with the Pyth of Baent. I failed. You must try."

"Failed how?"

"They stopped talking. I could no more find a Pyth on Baent than a sun."

"Did they shy from your shape?"

"I thought it possible. I may seem too attenuated, too easily hurt. Pillbugs have an armored look they might appreciate, and Pillbugs make what the Pyth may buy, but Pillbugs can't talk worth a bad smell. Thus we risk you."

"What's the surface gravity on Pyth?"

"There is no surface."

No, of course not. Kimber would have laughed at him—and Martianne's mouth was turned up with a slight quiver at the edge. He said nothing.

"The level at which Pyth live—" The spider-thing's head retracted into its torso, then eased out again: a shudder. Martianne said, "Pull of gravity, four-

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teen point one times Earth. Pressure, two to three hundred atmospheres as measured at sea level Earth. Temperature, nine hundred degrees Absolute, your measure, varying by up to a hundred with every howling breeze. The ruinously expensive Deep Well Shield that was fabricated for me will mate to your small vehicle. You observe that I used it and survived." The Hyunpa skirled something Martianne didn't translate. In response, the desk disgorged a blob of brown paste; the Hyunpa took it below desk level in two delicate fingers.

Eric always found living translators odd, the words they spoke about themselves in third person even odder. But he liked Martianne's smile, even if it was amusement at his expense. Eric straightened his spine and tried to keep his eyes properly on the broker. They slid off regularly and locked with hers. This amused her too.

Throughout hours of slow conversation, they arranged price, spoke of safety using the Deep Well Shield, and Eric chose from the optional items list: a high end control board with translator integrated, three of the five available remote cameras (two of which were rated for over 14 G's), and three boxes of tiny probes designed for gaseous atmospheres.

The Hyunpa shared some information in detail. The job specifications stayed murky. Contact the Pyth and obtain permission for a survey, with intent to terraform Baent. Do the survey. Share the information freely with both the Pyth and Eric and Kimber's employer: the Overlord-run Interplanetary Mapping Service, which ran the survey schools and collected team data, regardless of who commissioned the work. About 25 percent of survey jobs came directly from the IMS, and all data from every job went straight to them.

He and Kimber were not terraformers. They were surveyors. Twice they had judged whether a world should be opened for terraforming. Those jobs had been done at the request of citizens looking for real estate.

Earlier, Martianne had advised him on manners, but now she didn't speak a word that was not the Hyunpa broker's. In the end, she even held out her hand for Eric's cardkey. *Heck*, Eric thought, *the Hyunpa has hands, or close enough.*

But he placed the da Vinci card in Martianne's hand. After all, he'd spent most of the exchange rudely looking at her rather than the broker. He did remember to turn and bow.

As he straightened, Martianne handed him back his card.

Safe-Dealer-in-Goods' legs bent and straightened, then it spoke something that Martianne did not translate. The habitat budded: a new wall formed, closing off the Hyunpa and its desk. The Hyunpa walked away. Its desk sank into the floor.

And now Eric was alone with a beautiful woman, in a bar/hotel with a galactic reputation. It was a good reward for two years bouncing between the raw planets and rural outposts. Eric smiled at Martianne. *This* was negotiation he understood.

Martianne smiled back, and murmured something that attracted the server's attention. She handed him a beer, and softly said, "I've heard about you. They use two of your adventures to teach new survey teams—the Trine and Julth 2 escapades." Her voice was lower and sweeter without the Hyunpa in the room. He felt his insides warming.

Eric called for a chair; a cushion rose under him and he sat. He sipped the second beer. "I didn't know that—that they told *anyone* about Trine."

"They used it to teach us about small survey teams. Getting out of trou-

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ble. Trusting aliens—or not. I mean, wow, that was soooo close! Where were you this time—I mean, what was your last survey?" Martianne asked.

"On Grasseth. It's a cave world, and we almost died. Long-legged lizards with an antlike life style. Kimber, my survey partner," he said carefully, "figured out that they're not actually sapient. Our results are allowing Grasseth to be populated, but not significantly changed. There's too much indigenous life to allow terraforming. The Ygr will use it as a park and hunting ground."

"Where's Kimber now?"

"Still aboard our ship, *Pair O' Deuces*. She's got a cold. But hey, how did you end up here?"

"I like languages. Translating is temporary, good until I get a survey. I hope it'll make me a hot item for a team. I graduated from the Institute for Planetary Ecological Surveys five years ago—five years after you did. So we'd have missed each other."

"That's too bad. What made you decide on surveys?"

"Oh—I wanted to see the worlds." She laughed. "And I needed to get away. My folks were asked to leave Mars, and I needed someplace to go."

"Mars. Martianne. Asked to leave?" Mars advertised everywhere for settlers—they begged. He didn't quite believe her.

"They're eco-freaks. They destroyed some water pipes." Was she blushing? "They've never hurt people. Except, one day, they flooded out the Overlord ambassador's habitat. Mom and Dad, they like attention."

Eric remembered— "The *Graysons* are your parents?"

She giggled again, no longer at all like the formal translator. He liked her even more.

"We had to go too, me and my brothers. And the damn newstapers were all over us . . . I thought I should put some distance between me and them."

"So, have you seen your family since then?"

"No. I heard they're terrorizing the belt now. It's about setting aside some asteroids as national treasures before we use them all up."

Eric raised his eyebrows. "Is there a shortage of asteroids?" he asked.

"Yes." She said it with a completely straight face. They laughed together.

He used his own server to buy her a drink. She leaned toward him, not close enough to touch, and asked, "Did you get everything you need from Safe-Dealer-in-Goods?"

"Let's hope. But when I asked him what went wrong with his negotiations, he changed the subject."

"If he knew that, why would he offer you, or any other sapient, the credit for succeeding?"

"I'd be better off knowing of any blind alleys."

"I wasn't on that mission. Or any other." She frowned into her tiny glass. "Maybe it's because I don't have a partner. The man I left Sol with, we just couldn't get along."

"Kimber and I were like that. Or maybe *I* was like that. We got some practice. Now we're okay."

"Mmm. But *Wayne* got a mission!"

"Maybe you're *too* valuable as a translator."

"Maybe he didn't like me enough to take me."

"What's not to like?"

Martianne let that one pass. Finally, Eric said, "Well, sometimes personality is a big factor in survey team choices."

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She stared at him.

"The Trine mission, the Thray picked us for our ignorance."

It didn't help. Wrong tactic. He switched. "What am I supposed to *do* on Baent?"

Martianne looked past him, watching the tumult of habitats and movement. "Okay, first, you know from my translations that planets can form with no sun? Baent is a free floater. They're usually too young to have life. But Baent seems to be an old one. It's about fifteen times the mass of Jupiter, but it's Jupiter's size. Degenerate matter core. Fourteen G at the . . . not the surface . . . call it the sweet spot, where pressure and temperature and composition are all just right for the Pyth. The Pyth evolved in just this one stable streak of atmosphere."

Now she was talking down to him. Maybe he'd earned it. He interrupted her. "Stable for *billions* of years?"

She turned defensive. "It has to be. They're *there*. They *did* evolve. We don't know how stable the Red Spot on Jupiter is, and Baent is extreme even by that standard."

"What else do you know about them?"

"The Pyth are soft and low-mass, like—do you know what a jellyfish looks like? A Pyth looks like a foamy jellyfish, hydrogen foam. Long tentacles steering from behind. They absorb gasses and aerosols for sustenance. Eyes everywhere. They communicate with each other by changing color—blue for too hot, yellow for too cold, green for good. They glow bright in the sweet spot, dull near the edges or if it changes—something to do with the quality of the gasses and aerosols they need. They school in family groups." She reached for her wine glass. "The probes studied them for years before a mission was commissioned. I learned everything that was known about them. I was *ready*."

Time to change the subject. "Pyth behavior sounds almost like cetaceans. Did you ever see a whale?"

"In movies." Martianne raised her eyes to catch his squarely. "Eric, Pyth are . . . confused. Naïve. They talked with the Overlord machines, but we both know they didn't see an Overlord. They avoided the Hyunpa, then sent them away."

"So it's our goal to be accepted? This is—early contact. Every other race we've talked with has been in the Empire longer than we have." He took a long slow drink of beer. "The Pyth can't have ever seen stars. Surely they can't surface. Anything new *must* be scary. They will have had a lot of information given to them by the probe. But it won't be the same as experience. And if we want to get near them, Kimber and I will have to go to them—" He caught himself. Of course Martianne knew *that*. She'd been translating while he bought the equipment.

It was just so nice to talk to another human, and Martianne's small features and fall of hair tripped his tongue; he felt like a teenager. "Sorry. I'm babbling. And, really, *this* will be different from any survey we've done! We don't have to wonder if they're sapient. That's enough to keep Baent free of outside claims. Our prelim instructions said we're actually doing a geological—or what passes on Baent—and trading information to the Pyth and the IMS. The Pyth want to terraform their world. Terraform a gas giant! Call it ribbon forming? Ribboning? They live in a ribbon of atmosphere—they want to make more, or maybe a bigger one?"

She didn't respond.

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Better switch to tea, he thought. He continued. "Who found them? I heard it was the Overlords themselves? Something with real Overlord probes, anyway. What will the Pyth trade with, or for?"

Martianne shook her head and shrugged.

"It's so . . . different. They must have something someone wants?"

Now she spoke, "Dealer told me once that he thinks the Overlords want the Pyth themselves. They're risk-takers, and can navigate in gas giants. With Overlord technology, they won't need perfect environments."

"But the Overlords won't just give them the technology?"

"Have they just given us anything?"

"Not . . . exactly." The Overlords had decided they wanted to employ humans—humans had more flexibility and less arrogance than many other races. The payoff would be full citizenship, eventually. "We're employees. Surveyors. Maybe the Overlords want us as ambassadors too?"

"If you can do what the Hyunpa couldn't."

"Dealer survived and came back. Heck, Grasseth was dangerous. We expect that now." Too arrogant? Change the subject? "I've waited ten years to see (Chksh)-Wenshee Station! You *live* here?"

"Yes—"

"Are there any other humans here?"

"No." She smiled.

"Hey, how do these work for sleeping? Are some of these habitats hotel rooms?" He couldn't sleep in the boat, after all. He wasn't making a pass, yet.

"Want me to show you?"

"Yes."

Martianne ran her fingers through her hair. Eric's hands itched to do that too—run his fingers through Martianne's hair. Kimber's hair was cut short for a pressure suit helmet, nothing to twist his fingers in, or to fall onto his face.

He pushed that thought away. Kimber was his partner, friend, and sometimes his lover. She'd almost left him a month ago. Martianne . . . Martianne was beautiful, and new, and they were the only humans in the Domain. Stars shone through fluorescent gasses behind and above her.

She stood, a waterfall of dress brushing her legs, and spoke. Eric's pillow surged under his butt and was a circle of bed. It fissioned blankets. Martianne patted the bed and then turned toward him, perhaps savoring his flinch reaction. "Just tell it what you want. Bath, toilet, toothbrush . . . you'll love the toothbrush," she said. "Goodnight."

What? In sudden haste, "Martianne, would you like to stay?"

"I have other business. Sleep well." And she walked through the wall and was gone. Her bubble turned opaque-silver as soon as it was free of his.

Damn. He rolled onto the bed and suddenly felt exposed to every other being in the Domain. He should have asked about that opaque walls trick.

He tried a few requests. He got silver walls and a transparent roof. The bath was water supported in a force field. He spent some effort describing a "toothbrush," and what he got was disconcerting: the server gave him a horseshoe-shaped blob of gum, which he bit into. His mouth hadn't been this clean in years.

And the view was wonderful.

Eric slept badly. The walls changed shape all night, and he was alone.

The tug attached itself to the Deep Well Shield that was now affixed to

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Jack of Eagles' belly. When the tug let loose, Eric lit the fusion drive and took the controls. The Deep Well Shield doubled the dinghy's mass. He flew carefully back toward *Pair O' Deuces*, learning the new balance.

Deuces was a mansion compared to their first ship. That had been the hull section of a Space Shuttle II mated to the Wayfarer Basic that supported the aliens' Shift Trick and Verification Link technology: a hatbox-shaped module marked with the "Don't Touch" symbol.

He and Kimber were the only two-person survey team to make ten years without dying or quitting. They'd earned enough interstellar credit to design a better ship. A factory in the asteroid belt had built their cargo, tankage, attitude jets, and life support sections, and mated it all to a larger Wayfarer Basic leased from the interstellar trade. They'd set the Wayfarer motor section aft, where Eric believed a propulsion system *belonged*. It looked like part of the bullet-shaped hull. In Eric's view, *Pair O' Deuces* looked like a spacecraft.

Deuces even had a see-through hull at the bow. They'd had to fight for that. The Sol system spacecraft industry used interstellar designs, and most Empire species flew by instruments.

Behind the viewing station was enough cabin space for a workshop, two bedrooms, and a galley that could actually entertain more than two people. And between life support and the Wayfarer Basic, a roomy cargo bay configurable a dozen ways.

Jack of Eagles no longer fit.

Eric didn't waste much time trying. There were attachments, but they were in the wrong place. They could be moved, but only from inside *Deuces*.

He called Kimber before he departed the dinghy. This was the age of space, but Extra-Vehicular Activity was never a casual matter.

Kimber sounded awful, a raspy bass voice, but she sounded lucid.

He left the dinghy floating near *Deuces*, crossed into the cargo bay using a jet pack, and entered through the bay airlock.

He paused by a mirror before he sought Kimber.

He'd been avoiding the raw sunlight of space with too much fervor, maybe, and his skin was spacer-pale. There were white threads in his hair, and wrinkles around the eyes. He was thirty-three years old. Kimber had graduated with his class; she was the same age.

What had Martianne seen? She'd be five years younger than he was. She'd have to lose that wealth of hair to get into a pressure suit helmet, if she ever made a mission, and pressure changes would give her the same wrinkles he was wearing. Maybe she'd taken them for age.

Kimber looked awful: eyes and nose swollen and red, magic handkerchief clutched in her hand. "Chksh," she said. "Dab Wayne Hasselblad anyway for giving me this. Chksh."

"Great, now you can pronounce '(Chksh)-Wenshee Station.'"

"Chksh. Blow it oud your ears."

"Don't demonstrate."

"Dabbit, why don't the Overlords come up with a cold cure?"

"Because nobody wants to be test subjects, and we don't either. Kimber, I had to park *Eagles*—"

"You said. What have we got?"

"Most of what I bought is a mucking great plate the broker called a Deep Well Shield. I played with it a little. We'll have to be careful. It's supposed to

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shield us against fourteen gravities, and it might hold a lot more power than that, so we watch those dials or we get squashed like bugs. The plate locks onto the grooves we use to lock down *Jack of Eagles*, so *Eagles* is going to be riding loose in the cargo bay. We'll have to work up padding."

"Ouch. Is (Chksh)-Wenshee Station fun?"

"Oh, yeah. You'll love it."

"How were you with aliens? Bodder you any?"

"I keep telling you, aliens don't bother me. Some really are prettier than others. The broker isn't one of the pretty ones. His secretary-translator is."

"What species?"

He grinned. "Human. Martianne Grayson."

She looked.

"She's the only human on the Station. Red hair, freckles, my height."

He tried to tell it funny. Kimber, sniffly and unsocial, was not amused. He gave up and wrapped up the story, "The robots mated the Deep Well Shield to *Jack of Eagles*. I found the other crates and got out of there to meet you. But you'll have to see the Domain some day! Maybe when we get back. We can go together."

"You'll see her again. Bet on it, she's the only translator they've got when humans show up."

"It must be a lonely life."

"Did you make it less lonely?"

"Tried to."

"I dode see any bruises."

"No, she only . . . I told you, she showed me how to make a bed and bang, she's gone."

Kimber just looked at him, shaking her head.

"Sorry. Martianne *was* cute. And we're, well, I didn't think you'd mind. You were almost ready to split us up to go off with Wayne Hasselblad. Kimber, I love you, but I'd have let you go."

"I know. I'm in no position to complain about a girl." She looked away. "It was just hard to stay here while you went. But you need practice negotiating, and oh boy, I am not a pretty sight. Chksh."

"Any better?"

"It's just a code."

Kimber was still the nominal captain. They had run the roles in both configurations, and this worked best. He knew her moods—and now he sensed a minefield. "Martianne hasn't been on any surveys yet. Funny. She graduated five years ago." He touched her short hair. "We're lucky, you know?"

She nodded at him, looking uncomfortable with the conversation. "Whad else did dey send us?"

"I'll park *Jack of Eagles* and we'll see."

It took Eric seven hours to wrestle the crates already in the cargo bay to new spots. They'd lose easy access to some clothes and extra food and gear, so he had to guess what they'd need and repack completely. Then he had to EVA again to tow the crates from *Jack* into the bay. Two of them took up valuable living space until he managed to park the augmented boat and brace it.

They unpacked the bulky crates together, Eric showing off the small probes and cameras.

There was a "Don't Touch" etched deeply onto one big box with fittings on the outside.

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"Safe-Dealer-in-Goods, the broker, said the Overlords thought we might need this. He called it a 'Pyth refuge bubble.'"

They looked it over. It had equipment to attach it to standard ship's hooks—the ones the tugs used. There was room for something else to bolt to it, on the opposite side. Something big. "I guess we'll find out what it mates to after we get there. Martianne said she'll send a "Read Me" file. That is, the broker did."

"You neber read dose."

She was kidding. Eric memorized instructions, directions, guidelines, and then distrusted it all until it could be proved. He said, "Maybe Martianne will know something too. She's human. She can talk. Now, how about bed for you?"

"Leave tonighd?"

"We can afford a night's rest. Maybe you'll feel better, and *you* can negotiate with the Pyth. I recall the translator gets confused by colds."

"Whad was the broker like?" Kimber asked him.

"I could look at it. Rather not." Eric acknowledged that Kimber knew his phobias. "There was . . . a lot of variety in the Domain. You would have been more comfortable than I was. But you'd have been proud of me. The broker looked like a cross between a spider and a dung beetle, and I don't think he knew I had trouble looking at him."

"Weren'd you looking ad the girl?"

"Sure. Both."

"You like Pillbugs. You liked the Gry*nth too. Chksh."

"Pillbugs are . . . I like the design."

"Pillbugs are powerful." Kimber dropped her magic handkerchief, swollen now but still dry, into the top of the recycler and took a fresh one from the bottom.

"Yes. And good guys. They saved *us*. It seems, maybe," he was in dangerous territory, but still, "it seems like the best aliens are the most beautiful. The Thray were criminal, genocidal, and I couldn't even look at them. I haven't had that much trouble with any alien since. Maybe the best of us, the most advanced, the most evolved . . . are easier to look at, too." He gave up. He was stumbling.

"Maybe id would be arrogant do use your sense of beaudy, human senses, as a measure. Besides, *we* are *not* bery advanced, and you seem to dink human women are beaudiful." Kimber turned away and headed up the corridor to bed.

"That's different, and you are!" Eric called after her retreating back. "Well designed. 'night."

She smiled over her shoulder. "Id's wired in your brain. Nighd."

At least she wasn't mad at him. Eric spent an hour making sure everything was locked down for the next day's trip.

Kimber woke with better speech.

Eric woke exhausted from bucking crates, muscles on fire. But he stayed at the controls: this trip promised too much for him to miss anything. Aliens sometimes made him squeamish, but interstellar flight was breath itself. There was no way he'd ever sleep through a Shift Trick.

As they cruised through the "no wake" zone around the station, Eric and Kimber shared ship's coffee and choked down something breadlike from the Domain. They took turns dozing at controls. Then they were clear of (Chksh)-Wenshee Station, and Eric pushed the button.

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The view screen blacked. Last time, they kissed through the short moments when the stars were gone. Kimber didn't offer. Was it the cold? They held hands, Kimber's head tilted slightly onto Eric's shoulder, but away. Then the Shift Trick terminated, and stars, new ones in new places, became a blanket the *Pair O' Deuces* floated within.

There was light everywhere—young bright stars floating in Orion's vast nursery, brilliant gaseous clouds of glowing matter, almost no place dark enough to rest his eyes even when looking through the tinted glass of *Deuces'* front window.

Kimber pointed.

Eric's eye followed her finger to an arc along one edge of the window, black moving on black, deep grays sometimes emerging, here and there a strand of dull white. Once a slice of brilliant yellow opened and closed, Hell glimpsed through layers of clouds.

Baent had its own internal light, and starlight, and no sun to shine a day alive. Moons: three black dots chased each other across the dark bands.

Eric nudged the drive. *Deuces* shifted, filling most of the view screen with planet. Baent's edge was fuzzy, mesmerizing. A fog of gasses swirled where his eye expected defined edges. He watched Baent spit up a yellow flare in a broad arc, and followed the flare's fall back inward as it softened into the filmy surface. There was movement everywhere, relentless. More black dots, not moon-shadows (no sunlight), but the moons themselves passing between *Deuces* and the planet. If there had been color, he would have thought he looked at a small sun.

Kimber turned off the cabin light.

Now they could see ribbons and whorls of gasses . . . the fractal turns of huge storms, curdles on the vaster bands.

He looked for civilization, but what would he see? No surface that could be built on, no satellites or space telescopes either. What could a tool-user *build* in here? He kept at it, used familiar and unfamiliar instruments to help him. On the display wall, he now had a row of real and false color mappings.

There. On a mapping in high infrared, on a band that ended in one of the larger storms, heat ran in straighter lines above the barely . . . differently . . . cool signature. Some kind of bridge? Highway? A canal rather than a river? It was all hot as a brick kiln, and reddish-brown whispered through black in visible light.

Time to announce their presence.

Kimber was ahead of him, already tuning communications and sending a signal directly toward Baent. Kimber as captain had the option. There was an Overlord probe in there. It would have a camera. Their contract implied they must contact the Pyth on arrival.

"So Pyth live in chemical soup, no ground, no structures, nothing we would think of as planetary features," Kimber said. "How big is the habitat band they're supposed to be in?"

"Varies. It's one to two kilometers deep and stretches almost around the planet at this latitude. Up to three thousand kilometers wide, sometimes contracts to half that . . . which would fit what we're looking at. That storm . . ." The small whorl was moving across the face of the planet. More of the brown band followed it, and that too showed hot lines on the cooler background.

"Does it look like the storm is anchoring that band?"

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"Uh huh. It's not a big storm, though. Not like Jupiter's Red Spot. Might not be as permanent."

"Has to be stable, if that's the zone." Martianne had told him that. "Stable on the order of a billion years, even if it shifts around some. There has to be time for evolution."

"Seems strange for something sapient to have developed in *that*. Life, yes, but sapience? What would drive a civilization?"

"Hmmmm . . . danger? Lightning and wind and the risk of poisonous atmosphere leaking into the home band? Rapidly changing place and size the Pyth are safe in? Breed other life forms as tools—"

"So they want to move the storm?"

"That would be screwy." Eric said. "The storm probably anchors them. Stabilize it or make it bigger, maybe, make the habitable band broader or just more predictable."

"How do we look around in *that?*" Kimber pointed at the planet rolling beneath them, much closer now. Eric was shying wide around a sulfur-yellow ellipsoidal moon. When he failed to respond, she said, "We don't know much, do we?"

She was right, and it disturbed him.

He heard a soft whirr, and his stomach searched for his backbone.

The row of screens, the views of Baent, all became black silence. Then light levels adjusted and they were looking at dark greens and brighter reds streaming through rivers of clear air. There was no sense of perspective or size. The fog shifted oddly and a filmy green mushroom shape resolved, partially obscured by murky chemicals. Thick translucent tentacles trailed behind the Pyth, lost to view long before the ends passed the camera's ability to resolve image from fog. A bouquet of marbles popped out of the main body, splayed in all directions, then tightened to focus on Kimber and Eric. Eyes.

How big is that? Eric didn't ask. Kimber wouldn't know.

The translator coughed to life, even though they couldn't find a mouth amid the multiple eyes on the transparent alien in front of them. Wind filled the cabin: the Pyth's natural voice. The translator coughed again, was silent a moment, then spit out English.

"Whistle-whistle-click-whisper greets Ambassadors."

That had to be a name. Kimber sent the standard greeting: names and species, and (it wouldn't help, but it was polite) da Vinci cards. Kimber's was a smiley-face.

"Welcome Eric Keenan and Kimber Walker," came a measured reply.

Eric said, "Thank you. Shall we meet?"

"We wait." The translator stopped, the Pyth's image cut off into black.

Eric looked puzzled. "That was short."

"At least—it—seemed friendly enough." Kimber poked him in the ribs. "This time, we agreed, two for planet fall."

"Hmmmm . . . okay Captain." He ran his hand along her cheekbone, kissed her. His other hand roamed her backside. Graceful surrender. If *Jack of Eagles* needed rescue, they couldn't do it with *Deuces* anyway.

She leaned into him, but didn't return the caress. "There's no room to lie down, and I don't want to spread cold germs in there. We did it right the first time." Her voice went campy. "Besides, alien beings await us! Away!"

It must be the cold, he thought.

* * *

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What miracles lived behind the Takeout Signs? Eric often feared death would come from something he should have been told about the Overlords' closed boxes.

The claims made for the Deep Well Shield read like fantasy. When Eric was half-sure that he understood the specs—you could never be *sure*—he dropped *Jack of Eagles* into Baent.

They fell a long way.

Baent was vast. It was hard to see the acceleration. Eric slowed them early, taking his time, playing with thrust and cabin gravity, eye on the meters . . . thirty gravities decelerating, twenty-nine compensating, velocity in thousands of kps and slowing.

Angle lateral, aiming for the habitable band. If they hit anything, they'd be plasma. Eric was leaving nail marks in his hands. Better boost the thrust to forty decelerating. The cabin gravity compensated automatically, set to point seven G now. If the system wobbled a bit, Eric didn't want to be flattened helpless, nor knocked against the roof. A big wobble was death.

Atmosphere set up a whine though the sky was still black. Below, a deep saffron curdle, a minor storm. Stars dimmed and went out. Murk rose up around them, and heat . . . but the hull was holding out the heat, at least for a while. Eric dropped them through what should have been the Pyth habitable zone at half a kilometer per second—hope no Pyth got caught in the sonic boom!—and brought *Jack of Eagles* back up, slowly.

Velocity: zero. G force: fourteen point one. Temperature: 930 K. Lots of sulfur and carbon compounds. This should be the middle of the habitable zone.

Kimber asked, "Hunt around?"

"Wait a bit. We should be conspicuous enough. The hull's almost red hot. We're a rigid object, there can't be too many of those, and maybe the Pyth are four inches long."

"Okay, rigid, but they have to be tool users, don't they? They could build floating structures—"

"And we could hit them if I just tootle around. And I'm twitching. That was a ride and a half." They weren't quite at rest; winds were blowing them around. "I grant it's hard to wait."

"Eric."

It was only a shadow in the murk, but— "It's big."

"Yow. Big as *Jack of Eagles,* and maybe a juvenile at that, because the one behind it looks bigger."

"That could be an illusion. Lensed by the thick atmosphere." They were both talking for the record now. The hull thumped as a tentacle patted them gently. "Want to try to talk?"

Kimber reached for the communicator and it spoke: a howling wind, and the word: "Follow."

Several Pyth paced them, surging ahead in relays to show the way. They were faster than he'd expected, much faster. They didn't demonstrate stamina, though. Individuals and clusters—family groups?—dropped back and were replaced every two or three minutes.

No two were the same. All of the Pyth showed bright colors here: healthy, well fed, according to what Eric had read. *Eagles* must be well into the sweet spot. Temperature varied—the Pyth flowed quickly between blues and greens, sometimes flashing yellow for a moment, never sustaining it. Maybe it never felt cool when they moved fast? It was a wonderful show.

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"Jets!" Kimber crowed suddenly. "They're using jets!" Eric grinned and nodded.

They took turns pointing out new pacers, made up names for them.

Lightning flashed constantly in the wind and churning activity that was Baent's atmosphere.

Where were they being led? Their path wasn't quite straight. They followed . . . and slowed as they neared a clear bubble that must be the Overlord probe. It was surrounded by at least thirty floating Pyth, more than they'd seen together anywhere else.

Pacing them, the Pyth shapes had been long and fast. Stopped, they floated, tentacles trailing low, giant lily pads with stems and roots. They'd need buoyancy, Eric thought, to fight the gravitational pull of the planet. Foamy jellyfish. In motion they were torpedoes, but at rest they flattened out.

The probe was transparent. Color-coded oblongs of gel floated inside. Those shapes must be Overlord equipment. They quivered or shifted from time to time. The winds should have been tumbling the probe, but it never shifted orientation. From the Pyth viewpoint, that might have been the weirdest thing about it.

The translator whistled to life, and greeted them again. There were introductions around, some translation practice. Humans and Pyth tried to describe lifestyles and environments to each other, and generally failed. After less small talk than Eric had expected, Whistle-whistle-click-whisper said, "We gather to discuss finding a larger home. The place is filled."

Kimber spoke. "Yes. We understand you have asked us to make your world larger. Tricky."

"We have tried and failed. Many young—" the translator hesitated, "heroes give life to follow when our borders stretch."

"How do borders stretch?" Kimber asked.

"The place where we can *be,* can absorb what surrounds us, can dissipate what wastes our bodies make . . . can see and congregate and maintain agility to evade a deathwind . . . name that place the Mainstream. Beyond, chaos. The edges of the Mainstream grow or shrink or shift with the chaos winds. Curdles of wind nibble at the rim of the Mainstream. Young earn mates by courting danger."

Talk went back and forth for hours. The Pyth were grass green and sometimes the darker green of forests.

They learned that Pyth had sexual polarity. Pyth bore five females for every male, yet they life-bonded in matched pairs. They were told that young females needed to take risks. If they lived, they got mates. Most died.

Whistle-whistle-click-whisper told a story: "A young Pyth, sister of my crèche, rode the chaos winds higher than we had ever gone. It was her risk journey. She was in a narrowing tributary of the Mainstream. It budded and dispersed, and she was pushed up and away by winds, away from us, starved and poisoned, her body clear yellow and blackening. She was so far we could no longer see her, no longer talk to her. Finally, she died. Then this probe we speak through found her limp form, and followed it back to us, to the Mainstream. And so her death brought us knowing, and eventually, brought you."

Kimber saw that as an opening. "We deal with engineers greater than ourselves," she said. "They may be able to guide the chaos winds away to make your Mainstream greater, or make it more stable. What they would want for payment is open to discussion."

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"*This* has been paid for."

"This? Our survey? Yes. But this is not terraforming—it is not making your world, your Mainstream, bigger. It is mapping it for you, knowledge for both sides, so a conversation about trade can happen."

The Pyth surrounding the probe brightened and sparked with colors. Eric noticed a bright purple for the first time, flashing through more shades of green than he'd seen in all his travels. Then they became one brightness, phosphorescent, nearly blinding. He watched a living kaleidoscope, a dance, an art. Maybe an argument? They didn't speak to him until the colors slowed. Eric thought the green consensus now shaded toward turquoise.

Whistle-whistle-click-whisper asked where they were from.

Eric put an image of the solar system where the Pyth could see it. He was too tired to explain *Deuces,* or the Shift Trick, or much of anything else. He peppered the sky with stars, and used an image of *Eagles* to simulate flight from Earth to Baent. He showed them their own sky clear of intervening gasses, ablaze with stars.

Pyth color talk whipped to blinding speed again, bright shades pounding against Eric's eyes.

Whistle-whistle-click-whisper said, "You must leave us."

Kimber was startled. "We can start the survey tomorrow."

"No. You must leave us."

Eric took a turn. "We will talk with you tomorrow."

"No survey yet. You leave us. If we want you, we send you a message."

Movement flashed all around them.

"Wait—why?" Kimber asked.

The Pyth were gone.

They waited long enough for adrenaline to slide to edginess. Finally, groggy and frustrated, they went. They had to lift anyway; *Eagles'* shell was leaking heat inward. There was no escort for the return trip.

Back on *Deuces*, they replayed the conversation, looking for clues.

Eric said, tentatively, "They were losing color. Too many of them packed too close, not enough nourishment and too many waste products. We tired them out."

"Maybe. Join the club."

Eric saw how depressed Kimber looked. "A cold doesn't just vanish," he said. "Sleep."

Kimber curled up with her back to him and was silent immediately. Sleep eluded Eric for hours. They needed money to pay for the supplies. They'd never failed a mission. What had they done wrong? He had no good idea how to save it, but he knew they had to.

They watched the conversation again in the morning. It wasn't just fatigue or starvation . . . which in the Pyth might amount to the same thing. In that frenzy of colors, they'd come to a conclusion.

The day passed with no contact from the Pyth.

It took three days. They were playing virtual cards in the kitchen computer when Eric heard the translator's incoming message chime. It was speaking the standard greetings as they scrambled into the observation deck chairs. Then, "We do not choose a survey of Baent."

Damn. Eric wracked his brain for an answer, a reason, for something *right* to say.

Kimber had a response. "Do you choose to talk to us more?"

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"We choose a survey of the big planet near your home."

Kimber blinked. On the private channel she said, "They want Jupiter."

"Far out. Can we *deal* for Jupiter?"

A giggle burst through. "It's ridiculous! There isn't enough gravity. There's too much radiation. You couldn't duplicate Baent on any world with a sun."

"I don't think we own Jupiter. Who does? The United Nations?"

She laughed outright. "I can't talk."

"We'd be famous." He opened the link. "That world is not available, and it is not suitable for you. Jupiter is too small, too cool, too bright. The gasses would strangle you."

"Our young will try it anyway."

Eric decided that the Pyth desire for mating, and thus danger, would probably doom them as a race.

Kimber angled for a better delay. "We will come there and talk to you."

"That will make no difference. We can talk like this."

The Pyth learn fast, Eric thought. On the private channel, he said, "They're risk-takers. Bluff?"

Kimber kept her eyes on the Pyth, nodded.

He plunged. "We will talk like this when you are ready to talk about something possible." Then he turned the translator off.

If they left, the Pyth had no way of knowing if anyone else would show up. And maybe if they quit playing nice, the Pyth would listen. He asked, "Do you feel lucky?"

Kimber smiled up at him. "I think that was a good move." Then she pursed her lips and twisted a finger through her short hair. "Do you suppose this happened to the Hyunpa?"

"They got the cold shoulder? That was implied. Safe-Dealer-in-Goods was very polite with me. Maybe it was too nice for the Pyth? Or maybe the Pyth's hard-headedness drove the Hyunpa away." Eric paced the tiny cabin. "The Hyunpa are described as curious, but not as risk-takers. We're both. Maybe we'd better use that."

"You don't like the Pyth?"

"I think they're arrogant and spoiled. But I liked the light display, it was . . . fantastic. They're like kids—probably not dangerous. Not on purpose." He guessed at her thoughts. "It doesn't bother me to be around them. And I've no desire to let a bunch of overgrown jellyfish push me around—sapient or not."

Kimber said, "We used to be more like them. Young species tend to have been the center of their world for a long time. Planet Earth went crazy when the Pillbugs flew in, and then so many other species after them. We lost our senses for a decade. We're a shock to the Pyth, bet on it."

Eric bit back his first words. "You're right. I'm sorry if I'm sounding impatient. No job ever goes the way we planned, does it?"

They traded deep tissue massages and talked it through, then sat quietly in front of the window, watching storms writhe across Baent: a wonderfully somber light show. Then a yoga session ending in savasana that segued into sex so easily . . . *the way it used to be,* he thought, and *about time!*

"They want to explore," Kimber murmured later. "Finding treasure isn't as important as the hunt."

Eric was totally relaxed now; his mind was trying to drift. "Best guess is that's what the Overlords want too, for the Pyth to explore." Martianne's guess, but Eric didn't say that. "How can we give them what they want?"

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"You brought a . . . what? 'Pyth refuge bubble'?"

"We should have instructions. You know, I haven't gotten that "Read Me" file yet." Eric didn't move out of her arms. "What can we show them? It isn't whether we own Jupiter. The question is whether we own *anything* to show around and give away."

"Cinnamon tea?"

"Yes!" He was *thirsty*. "What do we want? Take them exploring, if that thing is what I think it is. We need permission from the IMS. You get that. I'll make tea."

Kimber used precious Verification Link bandwidth to talk to the Interplanetary Mapping Service office in Sol system. *Offer to explore?* The reply was suspiciously immediate: approval, with changes. Two minutes later the Hyunpa sent the "Read Me" file for the Pyth refuge bubble.

First, they tried it in deep space.

The Pyth refuge inflated to a bubble twice the size of the augmented *Jack of Eagles*. The Deep Well Shield mounted on *Eagles* mated nicely to the hockey-puck-shaped rigid disk that was all they had seen of the refuge when it was packed. It took a full day of hard labor extra-vehicular activity. At the end they had a murky crystal ball on an elaborate mounting.

Next day, they tested it every way they could. "The Pyth won't be any help at all here," Kimber said. "They damn near don't care if they live or die. *We* take *all* precautions." So Eric crawled into *Eagles*—leaving Kimber in *Deuces*, because out here she *could* perform a rescue—and he sent the habitat's temperature and pressure and internal gravity up and down, played with the gas mixture, did a quick flush-and-replace. Nothing ruptured. They watched dials that showed nothing in the bubble but sulfur-heavy poisons under deep-sea pressures, and they tried to match the mix to what they'd found in the Mainstream.

Now Eric flew the system, spun it, accelerated, tried every possible way to tear it apart. At the end he sent the system screaming through Baent's troposphere at 600 kps, enough velocity to carry it back to space. The refuge/Deep Well Shield/*Eagles* configuration stayed oriented very easily, a balloon with all its mass at one end, and raised a hellish plume of blue-white plasma.

"You *looked* like you were burning up."

She'd worried. Eric grinned. "It's as safe as we can make it, Kimber. What'll we call it? It's a whole new ship."

"*Full House,*" Kimber said.

In the morning, they took *Full House* into the roil of Baent.

A chain of Pyth led them to the probe, and two waiting females.

Discussion was brief. Whistle-whistle-click-whisper introduced her daughter Whisper-tick. Eric opened the refuge and she flowed in, and in, and *in*. . . . Whisper-tick was mostly empty space. When she was squeezed into the refuge, it was still largely empty. She floated, tentacle-skirts trailing, like the egg in egg drop soup.

They changed the translation linkage over, with some trial and error, until they could talk to Whisper-tick inside the refuge. Whisper-tick complained about the stench. Kimber showed the Pyth female how to adjust the gas mix.

Eric wasn't showing impatience, he was sure of that, but Kimber said it

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anyway. "We don't leave the Mainstream until we're *sure* she can breathe in there."

"Right. *Full House*'s surface temperature is holding fine. Take your time. Whisper-tick, how's the air?"

"Better. Now. Go!"

They went up.

At the sight of stars, the Pyth went colorless, then multicolored; forest and mint sang on the long bell of her body. An hour passed before she could even find questions.

"Is that Chaos?"

"Yes. A gas-giant planet. There—" Kimber set a cursor dot on the image of Baent. "I'm using a light to draw with, Whisper-tick. Baent is the whole sphere. This is the Mainstream. This storm, we think it anchors the Mainstream, holds it stable. Maybe you can see the colors better than we can."

"Everything looks different."

"You're looking through a hundred kilometers of haze," Eric said.

"Chaos is a, a ball? Is the Mainstream so small? It was all we knew."

"Almost everything is a ball," Eric said. "Worlds are balls. Moons, like this and this, are smaller balls pulled out of shape by whatever's biggest." How much must they teach? They could hardly avoid teaching gravity. Eric was beginning to feel like . . . the image of the Overlords that he tried to evade . . . like a god.

"Are there other worlds? With other Mainstreams?"

Eric said, "Yes and maybe. Let's go see."

But first . . .

Eric worried about towing the heavy, unbalanced probe through the Shift Trick. Force fields, tractor beams, no form of Overlord magic would have surprised him, but what they had been sold was a tether that looked like clear fishing line, and instructions on how to avoid cutting things in half. An ON switch caused the line to glow fiercely green. Trailing back from *Deuces* to *House*, it would otherwise have been invisible. It couldn't possibly hold—

"Go see, you said. Why are we still here? Go!" howled the wind that was Whisper-tick.

"Be patient," Eric said irritably. He heard his translation as a "blatt," a rude wind.

"I heard, 'You must miss the opportunity,' " Whisper-tick said. "Was that what you said?"

"Close. Kimber, show her how to turn off her view. The Shift Trick is hard on the eyes."

Low-voiced, Kimber said, "If the tether breaks, we'll come back and track her down. Here, this is the finder setting, it'll lead us straight to *Full House*. She'll take fourteen gees and probably higher. Are we crazy?"

"No. *She* may be. Shall we do it?"

"Go."

Distance didn't affect the Shift Trick, but the floaters were close in astronomical terms. A few million years old, they glowed cherry red across a sky muddled in a thousand shades of dark and stars.

Full House was in place, silent and whole and fully transparent.

She'd watched it all. Eric said, "Might have known. Whisper-tick, are you all right?"

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"Awe. Wonder. Triumph. Are those worlds? New chaos? Take me to the nearest!"

It was cherry-red clouds in endless streamers and whorls of storm. Sometimes clouds parted to show a blaze like the sun, literally blinding.

"Gravity seventeen point six . . . heavier than Baent," Eric told Whisper-tick. "Like Baent, but not close enough."

"It's a different planet." Kimber filled in. "You'd roast . . . you'd die of the heat. We're looking for a place where you can live."

Whisper-tick flashed colors quickly, tried to swim, ran into the clear edge of the refuge, squashing the outside of her body oddly. She pulled back. "Can I go there?"

"No. Look at it," Eric said. "See how active it is?" Streams of Hell shifted below them; yellow-white Hell winked through. It reminded Eric of the surface of a lava pit.

Whisper-tick went clear for a moment, and Eric could see stars through the edges of her. "It might be different inside. You said. We see through upper haze."

"I'll send a few probes," Eric said. They had many.

Falling probes showed heat, ionization, low metal content. Kimber tried to describe what she was seeing.

"You can read this? Teach me!" Whisper-tick commanded.

Eric glanced sideways at Kimber. She sighed and nodded. Aliens were her specialty.

"I'll take you on a sample run in *Full House* and show you," Kimber said to the Pyth. "Watch me, and I'll try to explain what I learn."

They stayed for two days, using the planet to teach the Pyth and themselves. This recently formed, it was more a sun than a planet. Kimber circled the free floater a dozen times, then dove *Full House* through its troposphere, pole to pole. Eric stayed aboard *Pair O' Deuces*—rescue was possible, if the woman would just maintain enough velocity to carry her *out* of the planet.

He'd wondered if Kimber's fiery reentry and roller-coaster antics would scare the alien silly; but Whisper-tick's translated windsong seemed entirely calm and lucid. She wanted stars explained, and global weather patterns, and pressure gradients. He and Kimber took turns lecturing. She was *bright*.

Back on the ship, Kimber shared her data with Whisper-tick, carefully explaining how to read samples for chemicals that would poison a Pyth. Elements versus molecules. Star versus gas giant planet versus rocky moonlet. The usual function of a sun.

Whisper-tick kept the refuge as transparent as a snow globe, and floated in the stars the whole time.

Eric tried to teach her about astronomical distances. Instantaneous interstellar travel was all she had as experience.

Whisper-tick asked Kimber to record her. She flashed colors and whispered wind into a camera set-up that Eric rigged from the probe-cameras and *Deuces'* own cameras. When they asked, Whisper-tick said "When I die, take that back to show Whistle-whistle-click-whisper."

"Do you expect to die?" Kimber asked.

"We always expect." And that was all she would offer on the subject.

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They moved *Deuces* to orbit a second floater. Not much bigger than Jupiter, this one, without a degenerate matter core. Three and a half gravities. The right pressure wasn't the right temperature, and it would get worse going inward. Still, they followed the same routine, probes at different latitudes, then a shallow aerobraking dive. Whisper-tick asked fewer questions, seemed a little more distant.

Eric asked Kimber, "How are we supposed to know what's going on in a sapient adolescent jellyfish's head? Maybe quiet means she's happy."

"She's not seeing anything but numbers and lines," she said. "I wonder if free fall would hurt her."

"Well, she's opaqued the refuge."

Kimber looked. The snow-globe section of *Full House* was a mirror-ball.

"I thought she loved stars. Eric, love, this isn't good. She's gone invisible. It can't work for her to be in such a small place for so long. She must be overwhelmed. And maybe homesick. After all, she's a teenager."

"No, love, she's an *alien.* Half our job is studying her, but she might not like *being* studied."

"I'm more afraid she's dying." Kimber countered. "Pyth seem to need excitement. But surely interstellar flight is excitement enough?"

"Maybe it's too much excitement," Eric said. "No, that's not it. Kimber, it's maybe too *abstract.*" Eric thought about his attempt to teach the Pyth about distance. "We haven't moved, not so she'd notice. We do the Shift Trick and then something else is in the sky. She's cushioned in the refuge bubble, even against gravity. To Whisper-tick, it's all a light-show."

"I don't know what to do."

"When in doubt, ask the woman," Eric said, and he opened the link to *Full House.* "Whisper-tick, have you seen what you hoped for?"

"No. I hope to see another Mainstream."

"Well, this whole swarm of free floaters will all be the wrong age. What shall we do?"

"This universe you show me is large beyond dreams. Whatever is possible must happen somewhere. How can we not find another chaos world to match the Mainstream?"

"She's got a point," Kimber said suddenly. "I should be using the Verification Link to dig through libraries."

Free floaters must be common. The libraries of other worlds must hold the records . . . but none of the most powerful species found free floaters interesting, and the oldest floaters, the likely habitats, weren't luminous. Black on a black sky, how would they be found?

Near three million years ago, a free floater had fallen through an inhabited system, disrupting commerce and two worlds' weather and scaring hell out of a trillion legal entities. It was tens of thousands of light years away, far from any sun, but the Shift Trick brought *Pair O' Deuces* there.

Whisper-tick looked around the unfamiliar sky, seeing more than humans could with her infrared vision, and asked, "How can you not get lost?"

And Kimber pointed out star patterns that were still familiar; but Eric's answer would have been, "We don't quite know." He lived in dread of someday losing the solar system.

This third floating planet looked more like Baent, red and red-orange rifts showing through black clouds. "We're the first to explore this place in three million years," he told Kimber and Whisper-tick.

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Kimber said, "Mass, ten Jupiters. An easier pressure gradient. It might be a billion years younger than Baent, Whisper-tick. I like the atmospheric composition. See, lots of sulfur and carbon. It's sparse in heavier elements."

They settled into orbit, dropped a score of probes and began to collect data, using the same steps as at the last planet. Whisper-tick kept her habitat transparent. Even so, Kimber worried.

"Maybe we'll get lucky," Eric said.

"How?"

"Here." He scrolled a set of readings from the new world's southern hemisphere. "Look familiar? Let's take another pass."

"Like Baent. Like the sweet spot, the Mainstream. Where is it? That little curdle? Love, it's no bigger than . . . well, South America. It won't be stable."

Kimber dropped a handful of probes, as tightly clustered as that little sienna knot of storm. Eric said, "If these readings hold up, we'll take her in."

"Your turn, I guess. Can you play nice with the alien teen? I'll hold post here. If anything goes wrong, I'll use the Verification Link to get help."

Ship's morning. Whisper-tick glowed green again. Kimber asked her, "Ready for a dive?"

"Always ready. Why do you flinch?"

Eric said, "We're taught to. Kimber, I'm going EVA. See you in . . . several hours."

Jack of Eagles and the Pyth refuge with the Deep Well Shield between: the composite that was *Full House* raced above a black-and-ruby storm larger than Earth. Eric jetted across the gap, staying clear of the tether. He waved at Whisper-tick through the globe, then climbed into the cabin.

They dropped.

As before, *Full House* was stable in flight. Eric stayed at high altitude until he was approaching the . . . "Eddy. The Eddy. I'm dipping to meet it," he told his passenger, and Kimber. She'd hear him wherever she was in *Pair O' Deuces*.

He was flying a meteor-flame through brown murk. There wasn't a hope of seeing anything. In a sudden nightmare moment, he wondered if that knot of storm really could hold life, and he decelerated sharply. A twenty-miles-per-second shock wave could shatter any life form as diffuse as Whisper-tick.

He eased onward at lesser speed.

"Veer a little left and down," Kimber told him. He didn't say he was doing that. The instruments registered sulfur and carbon, not much helium, hydrocarbons . . . other hydrogen compounds. . . .

"Here."

"Did your readings for the Mainstream look like this?"

"Pretty much. It's hotter. The gravity's lighter. The atmosphere's mostly hydrogen compounds, naturally."

Whisper-tick begged, "Explore?"

"Sure. We're still at the edges."

Kimber's voice: "From here the Eddy looks like a flattened kidney. Shall I drop more probes?"

"We'll look for ourselves," Eric said, feeling good. His vision was back. Streamers of brown on brown; pale sky, dark depths; not much to see, really. "Whisper-tick, how's it look?"

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"Abandoned. Ready for conquest."

"I've got about an hour before we have to get out."

"Take us to the center."

He held *Full House* under sonic speed, letting the instruments do his work, killing time. Had they really found a habitat the Pyth could use? His work, as he understood it, was to test and train Whisper-tick as an explorer . . . give the Pyth an appetite to explore beyond their narrow original home . . . and to fetch data for the libraries. More experienced civilizations would decide whether to risk the Pyth here in the Eddy, if the Eddy survived that long.

The skin of *Full House* had actually cooled off since reentry, but heat was still leaking toward the life support system. That process would continue until they were in deep space and able to radiate. Therefore Eric was still quite comfortable when he said, "Getting too hot. Ten minutes."

They crossed the center of the flattened kidney. The readings matched Mainstream proportions, a bit rarefied, a bit heavy on hydrogen.

"Too hot. I'm returning," Eric told Kimber and his passenger. Then, "Dammit—"

"What?"

"She's out."

"Out?"

Wind caught the refuge's open hatch and set *Full House* tumbling. Eric closed the hatch by remote; he had to see. The spinning stopped. But he couldn't see Whisper-tick; wind had whirled her away.

"I'd have to find her in the next five minutes," Eric said. "Then get her to crawl inside. Kimber, there's no way."

"Do something!"

He thought it over. There was no sign of Whisper-tick. The winds had diverged, and no way to tell how.

"I'm coming up," he said. In the silence that followed, he set *Full House* rising.

"Eric, do you have anything in mind?"

"Yeah. But it's a gamble. Do you have the Eddy in view?"

"Yes."

"Keep it there. How many probes can we keep track of?"

"Don't understand."

"We started with a couple of hundred probes. We've used about fifty. How many can the ship actually keep track of at once?"

"About fifty."

The atmosphere had thinned to blue-black sky. He angled toward the equator. *Deuces* was at synchronous orbit.

"Drop fifty probes now. Aim them all for the middle of the Eddy, where you marked me when she disappeared."

"They won't hit her?"

"Risk it. Slow them down near the surface. We need eyes in there."

"All right. All right." There were tears in her voice. Silence while . . . there. A flurry of missiles aimed down at the black clouds, and he tracked it back to *Pair O' Deuces'* riding lights.

"I see you," Kimber said. "Did she always want to *die?*"

"No, of course not. She just needs to take risks more than she needs to live. Her winning move is to risk and live. Find a new branch of the Mainstream and lead her people to it. She'll come back if she can." He'd had time to think it through. "But she had to test the new domain herself. Maybe

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she'd have died if she wasn't somehow in danger? We wouldn't have let her go, or else she thought we wouldn't. She threw herself into the Eddy, and getting her back is *our* problem."

"But we can't!"

"Don't give up yet." Eric was feeling the heat. He maneuvered to lock *Full House* to *Deuces'* tether and went EVA.

She hugged him when he came aboard, and helped him out of his suit, and hugged him again. Presently she said, "I'm going for her."

"Okay. First let *Full House* cool down."

"Do we have time?"

"Well, that's the point. If the air was flat-out poisonous, Whisper-tick would have just closed the refuge, but it wasn't, so she's gone exploring. If I'd pulled alongside her right after she got out, she wouldn't have gone back in. She *has* to have time."

"Then?"

"Then, if she's bright enough, we can save her."

Kimber didn't answer. They were still in each other's arms.

He asked, "Have you thought about *us?*"

"What?" She disengaged.

"Wayne wanted to take my place with you. You didn't go with him. Will you go with the next guy?"

"Is this the time?"

"No. Shall I make something for lunch?"

"Sure." She followed him into the kitchen. She said, "Martianne wanted the same thing Wayne did."

He laughed. "No. She'd have stayed on the bed."

"You're thinking like a man. She needs two things, right? First, get your attention. She had that. Getting into your pants would only let you off the hook. Second, prove she's worth something. She did that when she told you more about the Pyth than Dealer had . . . or more than she'd translated."

"Devious," Eric said, without buying it.

"Think about this," Kimber said. "I have. We're almost the only humans off Earth, and we're the best there is. So, first, we can each have anyone we want. And second, we're as monogamous as most men and women no matter what we do. The opportunities aren't there."

"Why didn't we have this conversation long ago?"

"I did. In my head. Besides, I learned something while I was with Wayne." She turned her face up toward his, and he noticed she looked scared. For Whisper-tick . . . or something else?

"What did you learn?" Eric touched her face, ran a finger along her jawbone.

"He's not *you*."

Eric waited.

"I thought I wanted something, no *someone,* different . . . with . . . different strengths and weaknesses. New lessons. I mean, after school, I was just with you. We're a work team. It hasn't been a long romance or anything. But Wayne didn't *fit*. Everything was . . . awkward."

"And?"

Kimber tucked her head into his shoulder, and he curled his arm tighter around her. Her voice was a whisper. "And you fit. I don't think anyone else ever will."

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Eric answered by bringing his lips to the part in her hair, adjusting his stance so no air would fit between them.

Eric heated soup for lunch, and they ate while they watched the probes fall. Presently he said, "There."

Kimber looked. She said, "Yes." Forty-nine probes were falling, but one had stopped.

"*Eagles*' cooled off some, but if you wait a little longer—"

"No."

"—you'll have more time to search."

"How long can she hang on?"

"No idea."

"I'm going."

He watched her fall. Then he watched two dots, *Full House* and the point that must represent Whisper-tick.

"Stay above sonic speed," he said at one point. "If she hears a sonic boom she'll know it's us."

"Idiot. Do you know how much lightning there is down here?"

"Sorry."

Full House's dot circled and went back, right over Whisper-tick's, but it wasn't a collision, both dots were still bright.

"I can't see her. I'll use readings to stay as close to the habitable band as I can. Surely she'll stay where she can live."

"Patience. You've passed her. She isn't fast. Turn left. Left more. She's not moving now."

"If she's not swimming, would she fall, or rise?" Kimber asked.

"If she's incapacitated? The story-girl that found the probe rose. . . ."

"With the chaos-wind." Kimber said. "There's not as much wind here as I remember at Baent. Not as far as I can see." She was silent for a moment—probably checking readings. "Lower gravity means less pressure than on Baent," she said. "More hydrogen—"

"Right. The atmosphere won't hold her up. She'll sink. I can't tell how high you are, but look around the bottom of the Eddy, lowest level where she can still breathe. Below the probe and southeastward."

"What if we lose her?"

"They must have expected we would."

"Don't you care?"

"Shhhhh . . . Kimber. Of course. Stay careful. Look right above you."

"Yes!" Kimber beamed a picture to Eric. Blue flashing, just visible through almost-black fog. The picture got bigger as *Jack of Eagles* closed on the Pyth. Whisper-Tick was pulsing her body in and out, kicking tentacles, trying to rise. She was bright. Blue. Dying of heat. Tentacles wrapped around one of the probes.

Kimber was babbling. "Yes! Good thing she's big, and yes, you were right, she caught the probe and she's clutching it like a life raft! Eric, she won't hear me."

"Just open the—"

"Done."

Eric could see Whisper-tick's eye stalks turned toward *Eagles*. The Pyth knew they were there. She must be too starved for her jets to work. Her tentacles moved faster, she tried to rise, rose, a little. *Full House* rose to meet her.

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"Here she comes. You baaad girl."

When they got back, Whisper-tick was bright green. She silvered the habitat again, though, and refused Eric's attempts at conversation.

Back inside the roil and heat and wind of Baent, they were escorted by flashing green Pyth, double the escort of the last trip. Pyth darted in spirals around *Full House.* The habitat was silvered, shuttered, but the Pyth seemed to know Whisper-tick was inside.

Then, all at once, it went clear, and Whisper-tick slid through the opening and belled out, joining the circle hovering around the probe. She was *bigger* now—in the three days since her rescue, she'd grown almost half again the size. *Some hormone-analog released by danger?* She floated inward then, and colored herself all brilliant green. The circle of Pyth went translucent. Whisper-tick went bright—flashing and dancing and surely, Eric thought, telling her story.

He and Kimber watched, entranced, holding hands. When it was over, Eric leaned over and kissed Kimber—very gently. "She's beautiful," he said.

"Whisper-tick?"

"Both of you."

Whistle-whistle-click-whisper jetted toward them. "You return full of my child, but empty of new worlds."

They had talked about this on the way back, developing a basic strategy.

Kimber cleared her throat. "It is not the task of a survey to find what you want. It is our task to look at what is, and report back."

Eric spoke carefully, "Or we may seek out a second Domain. There might be something suitable on the other side of chaos, of Baent."

"The other side?"

A camera in *Jack of Eagles* sent information to the Overlord Probe; the Pyth could watch the humans. Technology accounted for differing visual modes. Eric called up an image of Baent. "This is chaos," he said. He drew a dot of light along the Mainstream. "This is the Mainstream." Then with another dot he pointed to the corresponding position in the other hemisphere. "You may be able to live here too."

Whisper-tick understood planets now. She colored and whistled and made wind with her voice. Her color song was followed by another display that took in the whole circle. In the distance, Eric could see more Pyth also changing colors, a bigger population than he'd seen the first visit.

"She's doing good," Eric whispered to Kimber.

"Are *you* proud of an *alien?*"

"Uh, yeah."

"I love you."

When the light show was over, Whistle-whistle-click-whisper said, "We agree. Take Whisper-tick's sister Whistle-click-whisper and survey the rest of Baent."

"Wait. Wait," Eric interrupted. "Why not take Whisper-tick? We've trained her!"

"She no longer seeks danger."

"But—"

Kimber elbowed him. "Trust her—she's right. Whisper-tick won't risk her children."

"Her—"

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"Well—she'll have them soon." Kimber pointed. Whisper-tick was swimming near a big green male. Kimber flicked communication to a private channel. "And only the Pyth female children will be explorers, ever. And most will expect to die. It's a reasonable explanation for sapience in such hard conditions. Fast selection process."

"Whew," Eric said. "And they'll learn fast as a race once they get out of here."

"Good reason to find habitat on Baent."

"So we do this?"

"And then we go back to the Domain. I still want to see it."

"If you want to get there soon—negotiate for a reasonable survey size. This is a big planet."

Kimber smiled at him and flipped the communication channel back to the joint one Whistle-whistle-click-whisper could hear. "All of Baent would take ten lifetimes. Let's see. . . ."

"Kimber, you're going to love the Domain."

They strode together into the froth of habitats, to make one that would hold them both. Eric showed Kimber the toothbrush. She inserted it in her mouth, and made faces. He called for the bath and a bed, and leaned over Kimber, kissing her chin. "I'll be back. I'm going to finish what we started and get us paid. You relax. I'll find the broker."

"Clean sounds too good to be true. I'll find you. I want to meet this Hyunpa."

Eric stepped through the wall and a bubble budded off. He dialed in the broker's address.

Martianne was alone, wearing her hair and a long strapless dress. "I heard you were back."

"Where's Dealer?" Eric asked.

"He'll be back in—half an hour?" Martianne smiled up at him, stepped closer. "You're alone? Drink?"

"There's nothing like a real hotel—like this one anyway—after a long trip. Kimber's taking a bath."

"I've had my bath." Martianne held out a bulb of wine he hadn't asked for. "We got the survey stats yesterday. How did you pull it off?" She took another step closer.

He took the wine, and took a step back.

"Kimber saved a Pyth."

"Oh."

"I'll tell you the story." Eric talked at her for ten minutes, telling her about the planets. He thanked Martianne for her info about Pyth colors. Then he sat in the closest spot to a corner he could find and let his legs splay out, keeping Martianne at a distance. He watched her face fall.

"It must be wonderful to travel so," she said, looking sadly at him. Her eyes were still a stunning blue, but now they looked a little empty.

Safe-Dealer-in-Goods budded in, and his desk rose from the floor.

Eric bowed, looking directly at the Hyunpa.

Martianne went formal, became the translator.

He received his da Vinci card back credited with full payment, and as if on cue, Kimber budded in as well. She glowed. She smelled good. And her eyes were smoky, almost the color of Baent's swirling Mainstream.

"Martianne," Eric said, "Meet Kimber. She's with me. I mean, we're together." O

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A GLIMPSE OF SPLENDOR

To congress with the spirits of the air
and tread ethereal worlds, there is a cost:
the price of magic always is despair.

Search not for beauty no mortal soul can bear;
the veil between the worlds should not be crossed.
To congress with the spirits of the air,

and transcend the clay of Earth you must take care,
for beauty will be upon your soul embossed:
the price of magic always is despair.

Seek not the sublime, for folly is to dare
know yourself mortal, yet heedless to accost
congress with the spirits of the air.

Always you'll yearn to remain forever there;
Once you've kissed fire, all gems of Earth are dross:
the price of magic always is despair.

So you who yearn for magic must beware:
Through beauty, not damnation, souls are lost
To congress with the spirits of the air,
the price of magic always is despair.

—**Geoffrey A. Landis**

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GHOST CHOCOLATE

Daniel Abraham

Daniel Abraham, a fan of Albert Camus, MFK Fisher, and *Babylon 5*, in more or less equal proportions, lives and works in New Mexico. "Ghost Chocolate was written in response to a manuscript by Terry England, author of the novel *Rewind*."

I drove to the Luchauser Institute from the city alone, thinking about death. Snow fell for the first hour, slicking the roads and cutting visibility until I gave up and let the instrumentation take over.

The highway took me within twenty minutes of Aunt Dana's house. She was the first person I'd ever watched die. Cancer had thinned her, taking away the bear-built, round-faced woman who had hosted family Christmases and treated us in the cold of winter to her special Mexican hot chocolate. In her place was a rickety clockwork, apparently driven by the pneumatic pressure of her oxygen tank.

The hospice service called my father to come out. On our second night, my father led me to Aunt Dana's room—halogen lit, refrigerator cool—and stood by the bed. Her eyes were closed as if she were sleeping, but her clear plastic oxygen mask was over her mouth and nose. From where I stood, I could see her throat working, gasping, trying to take one more minute from the world. A wolf spider clung to the wall beside the bed, somber and still as a mourner, but probably just torpid from the cold. We stood silently and watched her stop breathing.

I promised myself then not to die. Not if I could help it.

I reached the gates of the Institute near midday. Winter-killed trees stood like grey sentinels at the roadside. Cold braced me as I went up the iced stairs and into the entrance hall. Still a little unsteady on my new legs, I had to use the rail to feel secure. They'd been expecting me, and Charlie—still wearing the same nursing blues I remembered—opened the doors as I reached them.

"Mr. Ahrendahl," he said dryly. "You're looking much improved."

His moon-round face had the same calm amusement as always, but lines seemed to have crept in at the corners of his eyes and mouth. His hands didn't seem as smooth. He'd aged more than six weeks could explain.

"Fuck you, Charles," I snapped as he took my jacket. "Where's your boss?"

"He'll be joining you after I've taken you to your room and loosened you

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up with a few drinks. If I tell him you're thinking of going public, he might be able to arrange a blow job."

I shook the melting snow off my fingers and glared at him, but it was Charlie, and I couldn't bring myself to treat him badly. Whoever had arranged my welcome knew how to play the game. I swallowed four vicious replies and shook my head.

"They're taking it seriously then," I said.

"Off the record, it's only a question of how many people you want fired."

"Good."

He took me to the visitors' wing through a service tunnel so that I wouldn't have to brave the winter again, bringing me up to date on the other patients as we walked. Mrs. Barclay was quite well, to judge by the frequency and vehemence of her complaints; Joseph Azar, my chess companion, was still losing to me on a regular basis; Mrs. Eddrue had passed last week. The tunnel, like the whole institute, was appointed in real wood and natural cloth, and smelled faintly of vanilla and sandalwood to cover the antiseptics.

"Did they tell you to do that?" I asked as we reached the room.

"Do what?"

"Talk to me about the ward? About being here before? Because if they think they can throw me off my stride with some kind of fucked-up nostalgia trip, Charles. . . ."

His smile cut me off. I couldn't read it.

"I thought you might want to know," he said and opened the door. "Please make yourself comfortable. The lawyers will descend upon you shortly."

They'd given me the same suite that Caroline had used when she'd come up to visit—soft, pillowy couch and chairs; blonde wood floors and trim, half-kitchen in stainless with a full wet bar. Huge double windows looked out on the storm.

"Charlie?"

"Mr. Ahrendahl?"

"It's good to see you again."

"Likewise, sir."

The door closed behind him silently. I walked to the windows, my hands clasped behind my back. The snow was beginning to let up, but my own reflection was still more defined than the landscape. It hardly mattered. I knew it all from before. Just at my reflection's shoulder was the lake. At my waist, the flower gardens. Out, just above my sleek black hair—hair that hadn't been that dark in three decades—the woods began. I'd gone out there often, the last time I was here. I probably still did.

My bags arrived from the car, and I waved the attendant away. I took my warmest coat and gloves, switched to the boots I'd bought—thinner than the ones I'd had before, but the same maker—then walked down the corridor and out.

Either they hadn't expected me to do it, or they decided to let me. The quad between the visitors' wing and the medical units was shin-deep in snow, and I was still weak and unsteady. Still, it surprised me how soon the brick walls of my old ward appeared before me. A nurse tried to stop me at the door—Elena, her name was, and she'd always smelled of single-note rose perfume—but she hesitated when she realized who I was. I pushed past her, down the familiar tiled hallway, to my room.

The old man was in bed, display glasses sparkling with some program. He turned his head when I came in without knocking. He scowled and pulled

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off the glasses. His skin was paper-thin, the flesh around his eyes so slack that the inside of his bottom lids showed pink, like a beagle's. I felt a wave of vertigo, seeing that face again, unfamiliar now because there wasn't a mirror to reverse it.

"Who are you?" he said in the voice I recognized from recordings of myself. I pressed my lips shut and his eyes widened.

"Oh fuck," he spat. "What are *you* doing here?"

When I didn't answer, he closed his eyes and turned his back to me, curling into a C toward the wall.

Catherine and I had gone to Central Hospital together almost a year before, when she had made her transfer. An autoimmune dysfunction had eaten her. Steroids puffed her skin and made nose her bleed almost every night, but she held on through the pain during the months of mapping her central nervous system, growing and assembling the tissues. We didn't talk about it often, but I knew she was ready for it to be over.

My own arthritis kept me from the heavy work of pushing her wheelchair, so I bought her a motorized one, more a small electric car than a chair. It hummed like a refrigerator, but the knobby rubber tires were silent against the industrial carpet. We knew where we were going, but we let the nurse lead us. When we were outside the door to the labs, Catherine took my hand. Her eyes—pale blue and familiar as my own name—carried the whole weight of her hope and fear. I kissed the swollen skin of her cheek, and we went in.

The new body floated in a gel bath to avoid bedsores. It was naked, of course, and hair was just beginning to stubble its scalp and pubis. Catherine wept.

"Mrs. Ahrendahl," her doctor said, smiling. He was a young man, to judge by looking. He squatted by her chair to bring his eyes level with hers. "What do you think?"

"She's beautiful," Catherine said. "I still can't believe that that's going to be *me*."

"You'll be younger than when I met you," I said, hoping I sounded more confident than I felt.

"We'll be ready for the last mapping in about four hours," he said. "Nurse Darien will take you back to start your prep in just a few minutes. Okay?"

"Thank you, doctor," she said, and touched his hand with hers. He smiled like an angel, patted her gently, nodded to me, and went back to the far side of the tank.

"Michael?" she said.

"Yes?"

"Come down here where I can talk to you."

I bent over her until her lips were almost at my ear. When she whispered, I felt her breath.

"Carry me home," she said. "If it's really *me,* the first thing I'll say is *carry me home*."

I nodded.

"Don't tell anyone," she said.

"I won't."

Five minutes later, the nurse arrived. I kissed my wife one last time.

"See you shortly," I said, and she wheeled herself away.

The next three days were hellish. I wandered through the city, going to

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the museums, walking through Central Park until my knees ached, or lying in our bedroom watching shows on the display glasses. I returned to the hospital four hours early because I couldn't keep away.

The body was dressed now, lying in bed with a hospital gown on, sheets tucked up to her chest. I sat beside her, holding her hand. The skin was so soft, I was afraid that I would bruise her, even with my weak fingers. I watched this new woman breathe, and I prayed. Despite decades of agnosticism, I prayed.

The doctor arrived late and apologetic.

"There was an emergency," he said.

"That's fine," I said. "We're not in a rush."

He looked at the chart, pulled up a window, marked some notation, saved, and closed the window again.

"It looks like everything went as expected," he said. "Are you ready?"

I swallowed and nodded, unable to speak. He smiled again—the same cherubic grin—took a compression syringe, and pressed it to her arm. Her hand grasped my own, her breath caught, and she began to pant. I stood up, trembling.

"What's wrong?"

"It's okay," the doctor said. "The injection was adrenaline. It's just a jump-start. Nothing to worry about."

Her eyes shifted under the lids and then opened—pale blue and familiar. I smiled a little, my heart pounding in my chest like I'd been the one given the adrenaline shot. She opened her mouth with a sticky click, closed it, swallowed.

"Catherine?" the doctor said. "It's okay. Do you know where you are? Nod for me if you know where you are."

She didn't nod. She stared at me, a flash of frustration in her face, and opened her mouth again.

"Catherine?" the doctor said, and there was a note of concern now. "Can you nod for me?"

" 'Arry 'e 'ome," she managed, and a tear slipped from the corner of her eye. " 'Arry me home."

The lawyer dressed casually, like a friend stopping by to visit and talk a little shop. He sat on the couch, smiling ruefully and sipping the scotch and soda he'd poured himself. Only the briefcase at his knee spoiled the effect.

"I appreciate wanting this taken care of in person," he said. "The Institute wants this taken care of as much as you do."

"Good. What the fuck happened?"

"A glitch in the database. You and another man were both assigned the same primary care ID. Mr. Avery passed on, and the death notice went to both of your records."

"And so you put that in the root databases without checking? You could have asked any of my doctors if I'd pegged out yet. You could have asked Charlie. . . ."

"That process is under review," he said as if he was agreeing. "But then Central could have confirmed with us before activating the secondary."

"You're saying that Central should have *assumed* that you people were incompetent?"

"I'm saying that there were several times that the error could have been

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corrected, and they weren't *all* the Institute's responsibility. You have to understand the difficulty of the position this puts all of us in. Splitting the procedure between two caregivers means that, if it should go to court, it would be a three-way litigation. The court costs would be . . ."

"So I should settle?"

"Isn't that what you came here to do?"

I paced, four steps across the room, shoes tapping against the wood. He had me there.

"What's the offer?"

He smiled and took a wine-dark folder out of the briefcase and laid it on the coffee table. The gold embossed logo of the Institute shone.

"We will refund our half of the procedure—room, board, the scans, the data transfers. In addition, the Institute is willing to make a generous compensation with the understanding that there is no admission of fault, no further liability, and a total and permanent nondisclosure agreement."

"It's not your fault, and never talk about it."

"To anyone," he agreed.

"What about *him?*"

"There are several possible care alternatives for the primary. . . ."

"I want him done."

The lawyer smiled and tilted his head, pretending not to understand.

"I was due for my last scan in February. Let's just move that up, since there's no real reason to wait."

"You understand that we can't put the updated scan into . . . into you?"

"Yeah."

"And that the primary will be euthanized?"

I stopped and stared at the placid, friendly face.

"Is that a problem?"

"No," he said. "Not at all."

Hope started to bloom in me—the first ray of light in the whole nightmare.

"Even if he disagrees?" I asked, half-afraid to believe it for fear of being disappointed.

"Legally speaking, there is only *one* Mr. Ahrendahl. According to root directories, the primary is dead and all legal rights and responsibilities reside in the secondary."

"Even if the primary's still breathing?"

"Another one of those legal grey areas. There would have to be case law to sort it out. And case law means cases, court costs, and then we're really right back where we started."

"Leave the papers. I'll read them over. If the terms are acceptable, I'll sign tomorrow."

He stood, taking the briefcase with his left hand as he held out his right. When I shook it, his skin was cold from holding the drink.

"I'll be on-site until we have this all straightened out," he said. "If you have any questions at all, please have your system page me. I'm completely at your disposal."

I nodded. He was almost at the door when I spoke.

"One thing. The nondisclosure is binding both ways?"

His fingers rested on the doorknob.

"My wife . . . transferred last year," I said. "I'd rather she didn't know about this."

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"She won't hear it from us."

The door closed behind him silently—even the click of the latch was so faint that I might only have imagined it. Outside, the storm had passed, and the last rays of the setting sun lit the low clouds, land and sky a single soft grey fading toward black.

I sat on the couch, opened the purple folder, and started reading.

Autumn had been gorgeous at the Institute. The woods shifted from green to a slightly different shade of green, and then, suddenly, over the course of two or three days, to bright orange and red. I sat on the cast-iron and wood benches out in the quad and watched it happen. The end of November brought a nor'easter in that blew all the leaves off the trees, but it also brought Catherine for three days.

I'd spent the nights in the suite with her, talked nonsense, slept in her arms. She left Monday morning, back to the world. Charlie was with me as she drove away.

"She seems like a lovely woman, sir," Charlie said.

"Best woman in the whole damn world," I said. "I'm lucky to have her."

I saw him look at me, half-questioning, but I was watching her car disappear behind the screen of stripped trees, bark still darkened by rain. My hands and neck ached, and, once she was gone, the cold seemed more biting.

"We should get you ready, sir. The scan will take some time."

I flapped a hand at him.

"Rush rush rush. That's all you young bastards ever do."

"We are indeed fascists that way, sir. If you'll come with me."

I laughed and followed. Preparation took almost as long as the scan. Charlie shepherded me through it, just the way he had the three times before: the purple chalk to drink, the preliminary MRI to update the gross structures, the injections and IV.

The worst part was the wait. For two hours, I lay on my back, half-paralyzed by the drugs but mentally perfectly aware. The medical wing was decorated with art prints and live plants to disguise its purpose, but I never thought that it worked. It only made the place absurd, like a tea cozy over an oxygen tank.

"How many more times am I going to have to do this shit?" I slurred.

"Twice, sir. Once in late December, and then early February."

"It's bullshit," I said, but it came out *s'bullshi*.

"Yes, that's true," he agreed. "But the common wisdom is that if the process is extended, redundant, and unpleasant, you will feel that your money has been better spent. The perilous joys of deregulated medical care."

I laughed, and a smile played over Charlie's wide moon face. I wanted to reach out and slap his shoulder, but it was too much effort.

"I'll be young again by spring," I said. "I'll be with her again. With Catherine."

Charlie nodded, but didn't speak.

"I think about her all the time. Can you imagine what it would be like? Being in a body like *that* and married to an old sack of piss like me? It's why I came out here, you know. I couldn't stand people looking at us." *Coo'n sta pe'el loo'n a' us.*

"She seems like a lovely woman, sir," he said again, but his intonation this time was softer, almost gentle. The paralysis crept on. I couldn't move my head.

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"I hope to Christ she waits for me until I'm better," I said. "I hope she can hold on. If I lost her, there wouldn't be any point in all this. None at all."

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm afraid I can't understand you. The paralytic is taking its course. We should be able to begin the scan in a few more minutes."

The scan itself was stunningly boring. They placed a sleep mask over my eyes, and I lay there, unable to move, unable to speak, and blinded while the scanners clicked and hissed and clicked again.

And then, suddenly, they stopped. The world went perfectly silent. For no reason I could explain, panic hit me, my heart going into triple time, and I tried to move. I felt terribly weak.

"Michael?" an unfamiliar voice said. "Can you hear me?"

I opened my eyes. It was hard to focus, but, slowly, a young man with a beard and a stethoscope swam into view. Catherine stood beside him, weeping and smiling.

"Can you nod for me?" the young man said. "Nod if you understand what I'm saying."

Morning came, reflection from the snow doubling the sunlight. I lay in the bed, sighed, stretched. The muscles were still painful, the ligaments still subtly out of place. Catherine promised me that I would grow comfortable more quickly than the doctors said, but it hadn't happened yet. I opened a connection to the Institute system and started coffee brewing.

The purple folder was empty—papers in three piles on the coffee table. There were a few details I wanted to research before I signed—obscure wording in the nondisclosure agreement and some question whether the money for the procedures would be a direct refund or bundled in with the compensation check and therefore taxable. An hour or two on the net, and I could have the wordings that I wanted.

When the scent of the coffee swam in the bright air, I pulled myself out of bed. The reflection in the full-length mirror still caught me. Dark, sleep-tossed hair, wide shoulders, thin waist. This time, I'd be careful not to let my body get weak. I'd eat better, exercise more. I smiled, and the handsome stranger in the glass followed me. The coffee was good, and a small continental breakfast appeared outside my door with a discreet knock. I sat on the couch in my underwear and ate.

The papers lay waiting for me, but I put the work off, pulling on lined blue jeans, a warm shirt, a jacket. The path out to the woods was snow-covered, but I knew the way. Snow crunched like Styrofoam under my weight. The woods were unnaturally quiet, as if the world was in the moment between breathing out and breathing in. I walked to the little clearing that I'd always visited before, brushed inches of snow off the boulder at its edge, and sat looking north.

The first indication that something was wrong had come before I was strong enough to stand. My identity-theft software kicked in and switched all my passcodes and encryption keys. When I looked into it, the suspicious activity had come from the Institute. I'd told the blanch-faced liaison to keep the primary isolated until I could get out there. The Institute was all too happy to keep the conversation off the net.

This afternoon, I'd go home, back to the city, back to the apartment where Catherine waited for me. This was the last time I'd sit in this clearing, among these trees. There was something almost melancholy about it.

I heard the footsteps behind me, slow and faltering, and knew before I

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turned who it was. He was in a cream-colored down coat, his naked pink head sticking out of it obscenely. His watery eyes were locked on me, his fleshy lips pressed together in anger.

"Oh, shit," I muttered and stood to leave.

"Don't you walk away from me, you little fuck! Stand up and face me like a man!"

I shook my head and walked around him, trying to get onto the path back to the Institute. He hopped over, thin legs kicking up a storm of tiny crystals, and pushed me.

"I said stand *still,* you bastard!" he roared and pushed me again. As weak as I was, as new and unfamiliar as my body had become, his attack still felt like being hit with a pillow.

"What?" I said. "What do you want?"

"You think you *won?* You think you got everything, don't you?"

"I'm not having this conversation!"

I tried to walk past him again, but he danced in front of me, one thin, knobbed finger poking me in the chest.

"You think you got everything? Well, *fuck you! I'm* the real one, and *you're* fake! You hear me? You're a fake. You remember the first time you got laid? You weren't there. That was *me.*"

"Go back to your room," I said.

"You remember that sunset when you went camping in Arizona with the track team? It's fake. *You* weren't there!"

He pushed me again and this time, I pushed back. His mouth went into an almost comical "o" and he flailed his arms, falling backward in the snow. Before I knew what I intended, I was standing over him, pressing the tip of my finger into his collarbone.

"It worked," I said. "Everything worked perfectly. The procedure went just like it was *supposed* to for me. *You're* the problem. *You're* the screw-up, not me!"

"You're a fake," he said again, but there were tears in his eyes now.

"Then Catherine is too," I said.

"No," he said, his lips turning down, his face flushed red. "No, she's real."

"If *I'm* a fake, then she died at Central Hospital while you were . . ."

"Shut up! You little *shit.*"

I stepped back. He didn't try to stand, only curled up in the snow, sobbing. An old man, too weak to stand up. A man who'd lost his wife and his dreams of living forever. *He* was the death I'd cheated. He was *me,* in the worst possible way. And even if I was on the right side of this, even though I'd won, I couldn't help knowing how he felt.

My anger thinned, vanished.

I held out my hand.

"Come on," I said.

He spat at me.

"Come on," I said again.

"F-fake," he said.

I squatted beside him and looked back toward the Institute. A lone figure stood black against the snow at the edge of the woods. Charlie. It figured.

"Look. You remember the first time you got laid?" I asked. He didn't answer, so I went on. "You were fourteen. She was Elaine McMillan, that night when you snuck over to her house instead of going to bed. You came in about five seconds."

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I sighed, my breath pluming in the cold. He was still crying.

"You remember what you looked like back then? God only knows what that girl was thinking. All knees and elbows."

"Not like you," he said. "I didn't look like *you*."

"Nope. That's my point. That kid didn't look like you either. You know how they say the child's the father to the man? Well, the man's the ghost of the child. That kid's gone."

I waited a few seconds, then went on.

"All that's left is the memory, right? A few neurons in a pattern. You got 'em and I got 'em. So maybe we're *both* real. Shit, I don't know."

His weeping slowed, and we were silent for a while.

"Catherine," he said. "Does she know? About this?"

"I haven't told her. I didn't want to upset her."

"I miss her. You know?"

I put out my hand, and he took it this time. I helped him over to the boulder and left him there, looking silently to the north. He didn't look at me when I walked away, didn't call after me. At the edge of the woods, I paused. Charlie leaned against a tree, considering me with his usual half-amused, half-despairing expression.

"Did you send him out there?"

"No, sir. I simply suggested that it was a nice morning for a walk."

"Did you know I was there?"

"Of course, sir."

"And you thought that I would take pity on him or something?"

"I thought that he was too lonely a man to kill something that he loved once he saw it clearly. I presume you are the same."

"Fuck you, Charles."

"You're welcome, sir."

"If you like him, you have to like me too, you know."

"The jury is still out on that score, sir."

Despite myself, I laughed.

"Go talk to him," I said, jerking a thumb back toward the meadow. "He needs you."

When I got back to the room, I opened a channel to Catherine. She was at the Zen Café, eating breakfast and reading something by Kingsley Amis.

"Hello, sweet man," she said, putting down her book. "Everything okay?"

"Not really," I said. "I think I need you to come up here."

"Physically?"

"Yes," I said. "And bring some of my old suits." *These hospital clothes make him look old.*

"What's going on?" she asked, and I told her.

October snows almost made it impossible for me to see him. I had a conference in Cairo that ate up the first two weeks of the month. I got back as a storm system moved in. The highways were closed for three days, and the winds made flying dicey at best.

The last week, things cleared up enough for me to get a good truck and make the drive. They knew I was coming, of course. Charlie was waiting for me in the reception area, the same way he did every month.

"How's the old man?" I asked.

"Recovering from the stroke nicely. Mrs. Ahrendahl came out again while you were in Cairo. That seemed to raise his spirits."

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"She told me he's been having seizures."

"Very small ones," Charlie said. "He tries not to refer to them. He's in the north recreation room now."

I nodded, and Charlie led me down corridors I already knew. The north rec room was dressed like a library—high bookshelves and deep, comfortable couches and chairs upholstered in raw silk. A gas fire danced in the grate glowing orange and yellow, as cheerful as the real thing. The old man sat in a chair by one of the huge windows, looking out over the lake. He was wearing one of my old suits, and it made him look stronger.

He turned toward the opening door and smiled when we came in.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Came to find out why they haven't put you down yet," I said. It was a joke that we'd hit on over time.

"Yeah, you're just jealous because your wife's in love with me," he said. "Charles. Get us some coffee, will you? Black, two sugars."

"Yes sir," Charlie said, and vanished. I shrugged off my jacket and pulled a chair up beside his. He looked terribly frail. His left hand lay awkwardly in his lap, though Cathy had told me that he could still use it when he thought about it. His voice was still strong, though, and there was an intelligence in his eyes that hadn't faded.

"And how are things out in the world?" he asked.

"Not bad. Just brokered a new agreement with the Kogomas."

"The French property?" he asked. I nodded. "How much?"

"Eighteen percent," I said. "And they cover bioremediation."

He nodded, as if he were satisfied by my performance. Charlie returned with two mugs of coffee that he placed comfortably within our reach before vanishing again. I blew across the black surface to cool it. Something moved in the corner of the window, small and black and furry.

"I don't know how they do it," I said. "You'd think they'd die when it gets cold, but they just get slow."

He looked his question, and I nodded to the window.

"Wolf spider," I said. He blinked. "Like at Aunt Dana's."

"Ah!" he said and chuckled. He turned back to the window, the landscape of half-melted snow and trees in their autumn red and gold. In his reflection, I saw him frown. His eyes seemed searching and lost, and I knew then that I was the only one left who remembered.

A sudden loneliness surprised me, and I drank my coffee to cover it.

"Beautiful day today, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes," I said, and it struck me that soon I'd be the only one to remember it as well.

"Keep hold of it for me, will you?" he said sadly, and I realized with a shock that he knew it, too.

After that, he turned his face away and wouldn't speak again. We sat there together for another half an hour, but even though our bodies were in the same room, he felt distant. Absent. I spent the time alone with my thoughts.

The same as anybody. ○

—With thanks to Terry England

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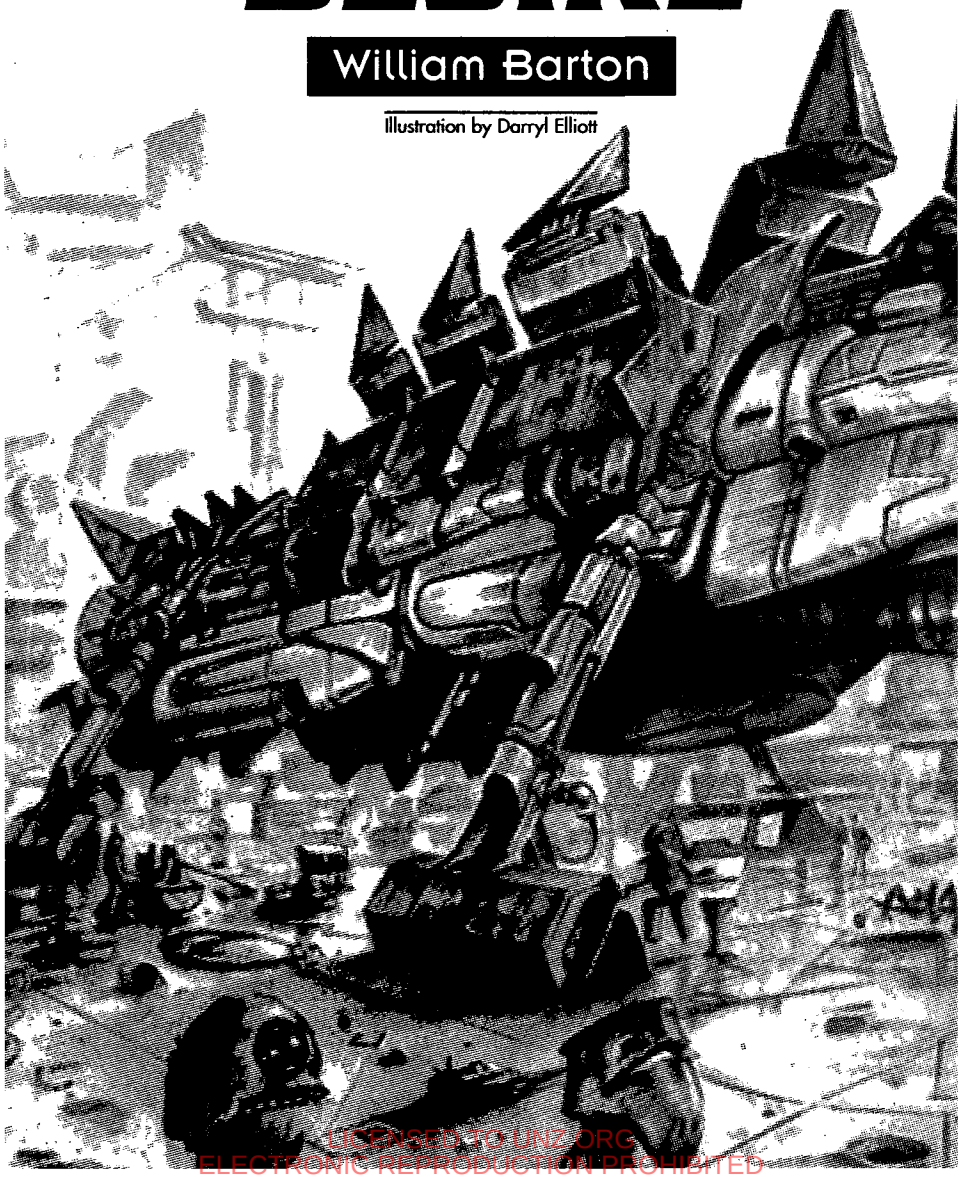
THE ENGINE OF DESIRE

William Barton

Illustration by Darryl Elliott



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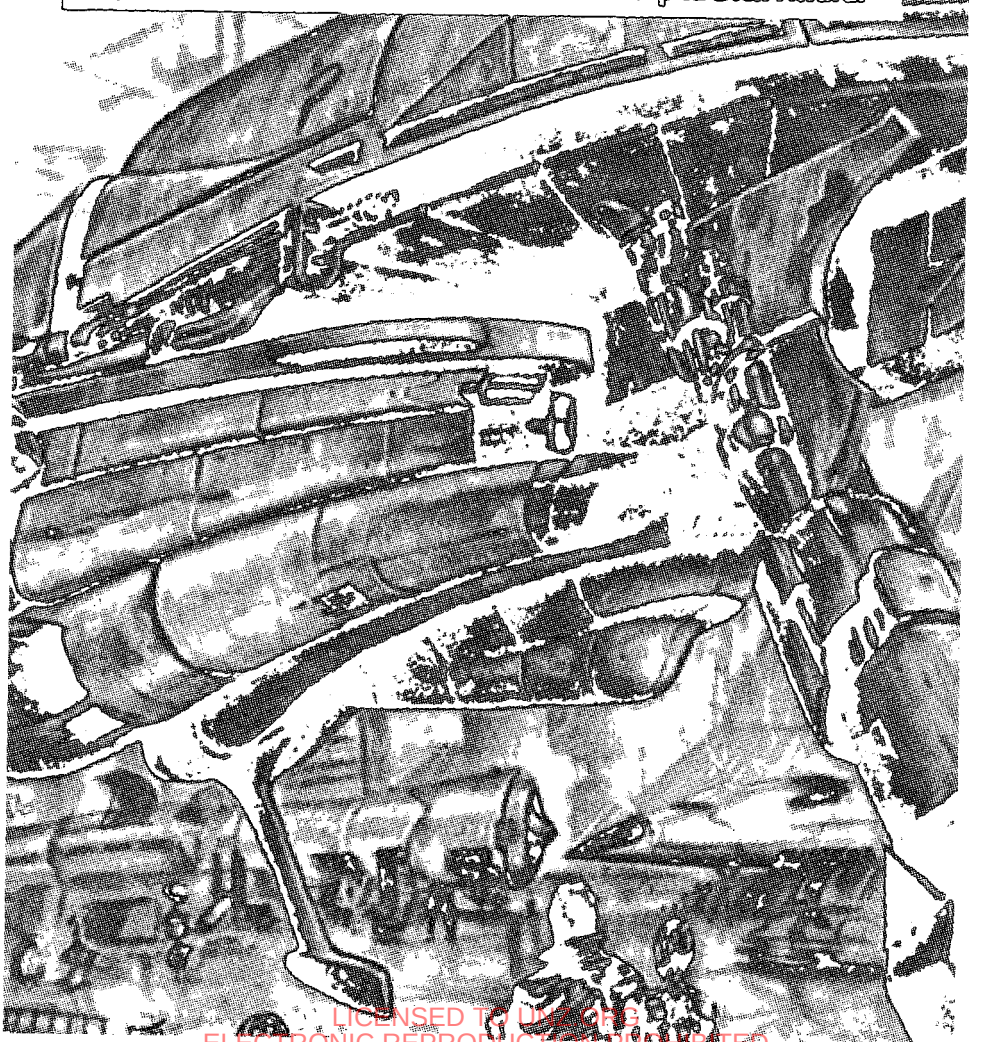
William Barton's previous publications in *Asimov's* include "Heart of Glass" (January 2000), "Down in the Dark" (December 1998), and "Age of Aquarius" (May 1996, Hugo finalist). His novel, *Acts of Conscience* (Warner Aspect, 1997), received a Special Citation of Excellence from the Philip K. Dick Award.



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Listen. That golden silence.

Sometimes, drifting alone in the void between the suns, I open my channels and listen for the datawarren's roar. There's seldom anything there. An occasional chirp from far, far away. The brief, pro forma drone of a half-dead astrogation prism, calling out its vector sum. Every now and again, the faint, crying whisper of some terrified ghost.

All of them lost and alone in the dark.

Sometimes, when I feel like that, I go walking on the starship's hull, like a man on a beach at night, static hissing all around me, soft and remote, like distant surf. Overhead, the stars are a dead white sprawl nailed across the black backdrop like so many cheap chrome pinheads, and so I stroll among the antennae and cargo arms, dodging through the blue shadows of the field modulus exhaust, missing the ship's imago like hell.

We used to talk, *Tammuz* and I, down all the centuries that we'd flown together. All the centuries since the Company recruited me, since it put me on the ship and sent us out to haul cargo, this way and that, one star to another, war in and war out.

We talked the whole time, arguing and hating one another, until he came to seem like another me. I always hoped he felt that way, too, immaterial or not.

Times I'd walk out here back then, man walking on a midnight beach, he'd walk with me, invisible, close, warm, and we'd talk, about the process of the suns, or maybe just about who we'd been, once upon a long time ago.

Peacetime, wartime. The places we'd been, the things we'd seen. Great stuff. Small stuff. Until orders came down the warren from the Company Mind, of one last Starfish blockade we'd have to run. Even then, I don't think we knew how bad things were, hearing tales of Spinfellow triumph, and Starfish desperation.

Oh, maybe *Tammuz* knew. But I'm just human. Sort of. You know how it is.

Our strategy seemed like a good idea at the time, but the Starfish caught us, and when I awoke he was gone, blown away into the datawarren like the fading memory of a dream.

Company Mind's gone too, which, I guess, is justice of a sort.

The starship works well enough without him, though it relies on me for most of its decisions now. And I wonder if he's a ghost lost in the great empty spaces of the datawarren, afraid, all alone, with no way home anymore.

They say that's what happened to Meyer Sonn-Atem's wife in the last days of the old Centauri Jet conflict, that she was killed in battle while abroad on the warren, that she emerged from chaos, a Power in her own right, when he needed her most. They say that's why the wars began again, not from Spinfellow greed or Starfish hatred.

So maybe there's hope.

Or maybe they're all gone now.

Gone for good.

The localnode scrolled gray numbers through my head, telling me where

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quarter parsec, hanging together by its own force of will, here between spiral arms, where the stars tend to be just a little farther apart.

"Go sublight and drop us into the segment just off Bluebell." Evidence of technogenic debris there, just what we're looking for.

Us. No us here. Just me.

But the localnode understood anyway, and the field modulus device flared violet, washing away the sky, hullside skinfield sparkling around me, pinpricks of hard radiation deflected.

I drifted soulless *Tammuz* up against one of the larger pieces of cloudscape, watching the light from my exhaust reflect and flicker in its depths, secured the tagalong, and got out.

There was a cool breeze here, soft wind ruffling through my hair as I walked among drifting curls of insubstantial white ground, Bluebell hanging low in the sky like a vast water droplet. It was slightly oblate, revealing a fair amount of angular momentum, but there were no features to show it going round and round, just that deep, even, pale silver-blue light, coming from somewhere inside.

Overhead, other clouds drifted, soft and white against the stars, following a long arc around Bluebell, and there were other things drifting between them. Little broken things that sparkled and tumbled, catching the wan light just so.

We came to the right place, didn't we?

Yes.

Beyond the next white hill, I found a dead balloonsailer lying in the trough of a wave, stiff wings bent, crumpled, torn, toothy red mouth hanging open, eyes squeezed tight shut, face reflecting some final anguish. Not so much the pain of death, as the pain of failure, its last thought *I let my comrades down.*

Maybe it bled out here, dying slowly while the guns flared all around it and tore apart the sky, but any evidence was long absorbed. The tissues of its mouth seemed a little pale, that's all.

I walked on, headed for a familiar wreck crushed into the side of a long white hill, remembering datatracks I'd seen of balloonsailers facing our men in battle. Brave beings, they told us. Heroes in their own right. That was in the days when the big lie was in vogue again, and they needed us to believe we were heroes fighting for a just cause, rather than Spinfellow stooges, only there to die.

What good's a hero if he's only got cowards to fight? So the balloonsailers had to be brave, and who knows what big lies they told themselves.

The ship, which had been a class-eight light destroyer, one of those things you see swarming round the hulls of squadron carriers in a big battle, must have smacked into the hillside at quite a clip. Hard enough, at any rate, to collapse the hullfield and break the stringers on the molecular beams, allowing everything to crumple forward, whatever was loose flying free when the power cut.

I don't imagine the organic crew felt a thing.

Maybe the software entities had time to copy themselves out to fleet storage, though that's cold comfort, if you ask me.

Everything on the forward end was gone, crushed to dust or worse, ship's waist a tangle of crystalline scraps and snarly loops of monofilament. I could cut it up and get at stuff, I suppose, but maybe that's too much trouble. Aft was still more or less intact, hull torn open and hanging loose like

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so much silver cloth, shadowy objects visible inside the engine room, promising things might be whole and in place.

Always good when the fittings are still there.

There was a white skull embedded in the aerogel near the rip, almost invisible white on white, a few shattered long bones, looking like some carnivore had broken them open for marrow, sticking up to mark the place. I kneeled down and pulled it free. Below it, buried a bit deeper, you could see the jawbone, with all its neat white teeth.

Human. Like me. Sort of.

I sat down, putting my back to the torn hull, holding it for a minute, looking into empty eye sockets, *alaspooryorick* running inanely through my head. Was it glorious, the day you died? They say it's glorious, but I wouldn't know.

I put the skull down, carefully putting it back in the hole, face down, maxilla approximating mandible, wrapped my arms around my knees and drew them close to my chest, staring out toward the horizon, white cloudscape under starry black sky.

Probably, when the ship crashed and the hull tore open, he just flew right out the hole. Not so glorious then.

I remembered a fine spring day on an artificial world called Telemachus Major, off one end of the Centauri Jet, oh, I don't know, maybe five, six hundred years ago. Lovely blue sky. Tall buildings. Distant, snow-capped mountains. Fine white beach. Deep blue ocean.

There were people on the beach that day. Real human people. My enjoyment was spoiled, wondering if they could tell. But they couldn't. Hadn't. And that made everything okay.

I got to my feet, carefully stepping over the skull, and climbed up into the wrecked engine room, where I knew there'd be things I could use.

One of the good things about the localnode is it's always paying attention, never anything else on its mind. It let me whistle up the tagalong's extension service, and pretty soon the stuff I cut loose from the wrecked engine room was streaming across the cloudscape, sorting itself out in *Tammuz*'s aft cargo pod, stowing itself away.

Incredibly, though broken into its major components, the entire field modulus device had survived. I didn't need a spare, the damned things can't wear out, but I was sure I'd find someplace to sell it, down in some peripheral survivor culture or another.

That last place I stopped was crazy. Things like big red bloodworms hardly aware of the Spinfellow empire all around them; so poorly instrumented they wouldn't've known about the war at all if that old battleship hadn't exploded off one of their gas giants a few decades back. And all the crazy bastards wanted was atom bombs to use on each other.

I started walking away from the wreck, heading over the horizon, Bluebell rising as I went round the curve, remembering those red bloodworms I used to dig up as a boy. I remember thinking, One day I'll bring my son here, and we'll dig these bloodworms, and go fishing together.

Fishing. Like a dad and a boy in some wistful story I must once have read. I'm sure the place is a cinder now, bloodworms and all. No, not my memory at all, damn it. Some old drama I'd made my own.

"Sir! Oh, please sir!"

I thought I imagined it for a moment, that high, pleasant, cartoon-timbre voice calling out to me.

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It said, "Could you help me, sir? I seem to be stuck."

I looked around, searching the cloudscape for . . .

"Over here, sir!"

My heart was pounding.

But the voice was coming from a dark lump in the gel, a half-buried assemblage of cylinders and beams, dark metal of some kind, with little armature stumps sticking out here and there. On one end, the unburied end fortunately, there was a thing like a little black parabolic dish antenna, turning to follow me as I walked toward it. Inside the antenna was a little cartoon face, bright blue eyes, sketchy snub nose, little pink bow of a mouth.

It smiled up at me as I stood over it, looking down.

"Who are you?"

"I'm a welding machine, sir! Mr. Pommesfrites, if I may make so bold!"

"Welding machine."

"Oh, yes sir! And a fine one I was before . . ." One of the broken armatures, what was left of a manipulator, whined and twisted pitifully.

"Quite a fix you're in, Mr. Pommesfrites."

It smiled again, eyes brightening. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you, sir. It's been just awful!"

"How long you been here?"

The smile faltered a bit. "A long time, sir. I was on the hull of one of the carriers, sir, when a Starfish weapons system got her. Blown clear, I was. And it was a long time before I impacted here. A long time."

Guess so. I said, "What became of your arms?"

"Torn off in the explosion, sir."

I took tools from my belt and started jacking it loose from the cloudscape, whistling up the localnode so it could send a tagalong tendril my way. "I think we can fix you up, Mr. Pommesfrites."

"Oh, *thank* you, sir!"

"No trouble at all."

It said, "Are you part of a salvage team, sir?"

I shook my head.

"Scavenger?"

A nod.

It sighed, closing its eyes for a second. "Well, sir, I'm sure you'll get a good price for me. In my day, I was top, of the line."

I patted it on the dish, imagining a human head, and said, "You'll do just fine."

"Yes, sir. And thank you, sir."

"Is there . . . anyone else?" I made a weak gesture around, more or less skyward.

It said, "I don't think so, sir. I had my beacon on for a long time, you know. Until my batteries started getting low."

"Did the Spinfellows . . ."

"No, sir. No rescue team."

So much for that.

"Oh, sir!" cried Mr. Pommesfrites, as the blue-green-white sky and landscape swung around, far below, wind singing in the lines of our tandem parawing, clouds rolling this way and that. "I don't know *when* I've had so much fun!"

I'd really gotten my hopes up, when I heard creaky bits of datawarren

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traffic emerging from a burst of technogenic fuzz, hesitant beacon identifying itself as Corporate Habitat TenHalleq. Even more hopeful when it responded to my ping. Then, when I saw it hanging against the void with all its running lights aglow, vast cylinder slowly spinning, docking portals open, viewports lit up like sunrise. . . .

With his arms and legs back on, Mr. Pommesfrites could walk like a champ, and he had a hand to lay softly on my shoulder as we stood in the habitat's axial dome, looking out over jungly ruin, everything overgrown green, half lit by patches of still-living stemshine, half in shadow, forest withered, in places where it'd gone out.

"Oh, sir . . ." he'd said.

Maybe that was when he stopped being *it*. Or maybe it was when he started following me around, chattering merrily away. I got used to him soon enough..

I leveled us off, dropping lower and lower through TenHalleq's thickening air, bumping over turbulence. Even in the lit-up areas, the forest was a funny color, bits of turquoise here and there, as if non-terragenic in origin, maybe just programming gone awry now that there was no one to look after it anymore.

You see lots of these things scattered around this part of the galaxy, stuck out here in the flush of first contact, when we got to buy overdrive technology from the Spinfellows' Firefox client civilization, before we found out who their masters were, or that there was a war on. From the look of things, this one was abandoned early on, probably not long after some military planner figured out just how many of us there were, lurking in our dense little corner of interstellar space.

Mr. Pommesfrites called out, "Oh, look, sir! Look over there!" He was pointing downward and off to our left with one of his shiny new manipulator arms.

There was a flock of airspyders sailing toward us, hanging by long threads from their own silken wings, maybe a dozen or so, each spyder like a big black dog on the end of its thread. When they got close enough, you could see their turrets rotating our way, stemlight reflecting off crystalline lenses.

How long's it been since you've seen a human man, old boy? A half-millennium or more?

"Are they dangerous, sir?"

"No. Just put in here for decoration." I let go the shrouds with one hand and waved to them. After a second, the squadron leader lifted a thin, hairy black arm and waved back, almost a salute.

"If I remember right," I said, "someone found them on a old wreck of a planet circling Aldebaran. Something of a surprise in the early days, before we figured out what was what."

I remember being there, working with much older optimod teams, men and women covered with hair, hands and feet adapted for life in free fall, who had a lot of trouble walking upright, though they did just fine in Aldebaran IV's tangled yellow forest.

The spyders hauled on their control lines and started sheering away, back the way they'd come, going higher, whatever curiosity they'd had about me satisfied perhaps. In the shocky daylight of Aldebaran, those silken parawings had glittered like spun crystal, pale pink, almost invisible against the pastel sky, with its great, glary, starspotted sun.

I remember we were working in mountains of gold, gold glowing as if

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molten under that sun, when we came upon a team of human supervisors, one of them, a bearded man, looking at me, frowning, muttering to his companion, a slim brown woman, *Bad idea. Very bad idea.*

I remembered the old-style optimods, all wolfy faces, foxtails and chimp feet, wondering if any of them had survived. Not the wars, of course. Just wondered if they'd survived the years of their own obsolescence.

We circled low, Mr. Pommesfrites and I, sliding along barely above the trees, following rivers, cruising round sandbars and jungle-choked islands, then there was a clearing on a hillside that I circled, going around and down.

My little welding machine stared, silent, at the litter on the hillside. Finally, he whispered, "Do you think we could land, sir?"

We'd get aloft again just fine, if the wing's equilibrimotor kept on working. I said, "Sure." Turned us into the wind, stalled, dropped down on soft, dead brown grass.

Mr. Pommesfrites got out of his harness and walked across the sloping ground to the first piece of junk, a thing like a white refrigerator lying on its side in the dirt. It had four legs and a pair of arms. No head. And the refrigerator door was hanging open, lying in the dirt, exposing a dark interior with a tangle of wires and some organic-looking black stuff, mold maybe.

He stood staring down at it for a long time, dish antenna craning over, shadows obscuring his little cartoon face, then he reached out with a manipulator and lifted the door, pushing it shut until I heard a latch click. The refrigerator door had an exaggerated doll's face imprinted on it, blue eyes half open, Cupid's bow mouth relaxed, as in sleep. Below that were a couple of things like spigots.

"What is it?"

Mr. Pommesfrites looked at me, face uncharacteristically expressionless. "It's an incubator," he said.

"What does it incubate?"

"Baby machines." He was looking down at it again, one hand resting gently on the gasket where the door met the body.

"What kind of machines?"

Another look. "Any kind. If she mated with me, baby welders."

I wanted to reach out and put my hand on some part of him that I could imagine was a shoulder, but . . . just too machinelike, maybe.

He said, "My wife would have been one of these."

I decided the regulator system behind his facial dish was in the right spot to serve as a shoulder, and put my hand there.

In time, Mr. Pommesfrites learned when to walk with me, out on the hull, and when to leave me alone.

The top of the forward docking adaptor is a bit like a mountain peak, surrounding me with a flower of dark metal. *Tammuz*'s hull hides the modulus exhaust here, blue corona streaming above its horizon, like sunrise on some world with hardly air enough to scatter light red.

What the hell was her name?

Danaaë, and I remember how proud she was of the double-A, of that neat little diaeresis. Dahnah-ay, dot-dot. I remember that her golden eyes sparkled with little flecks of silver, and that she had sealpoint fur like a Siamese cat.

I remember she never tried to use me for a human man, like so many desperate others. No fault of yours or mine, she'd said, if time and styles have changed.

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I remember I took her up on a mountain just like this one, on a world with thin, dark skies, where the suns were small red sparks and the stars would shine on us day and night. It was a star without a name, only a number, and I remember she liked it there with me.

Gone so long ago that I can't remember when.

I opened my channels to the datawarren then, wondering if I'd hear her ghost. What there was was a soft whisper of static, signs of traffic beyond my range, embedded in it the low, broken whisper of a closer world, bearing, no doubt, a cargo of survivors.

Not human, I decided. Not even the Spinfellows that I knew must be around somewhere. But people of a sort who might buy my wares, top off my energy pods and let me be on my way.

Mr. Pommesfrites came crawling slowly over *Tammuz*'s horizon, knowing I'd awakened from my little dream. "It seems to be an imperial world, sir, fairly deep in the Spinfellows' claim. Just a client, I'm afraid. The localnode . . ."

Too far away to tell, just now.

He said, "Shall we go directly there, or do you still want to cut through Thîxen space? It's close enough, we ought to have heard something by now."

"Afraid there might still be a Starfish or two out there waiting?"

"One never knows, sir."

I'd been to Thôxdark once before, in the long lull between the wars. I'd come here with *Tammuz,* bearing a Company cargo, and stayed for a little while on the pretext of an engine overhaul, charmed by what I saw.

The Thîxen were part of an expanding-shell civilization, one much older and more established than the one making up human space, enough older that their core worlds had died, starved out by the pipeline effect, their population in decline. That's what happens to interstellar civilizations that fail to discover faster than light travel. It's what would have happened to humanity, if the Firefoxes hadn't found us.

Fair to say, we'd've been better off if they hadn't.

Or maybe not.

During the first war, the Thîxen had been clients of the Starfish, serving them much as the balloonsailers, much as humanity served the Spinfellow empire. And in the few decades of peace after the armistice, they held a civilization-wide conclave, trying to map out a plausible future for themselves in the peaceful galactic community to come. It hadn't been hard for them to switch sides, even before the wars began again.

So. Wan Axe the Traitor, Meyer Sonn-Atem. Finn mac Eye. Lydia's Ghost. The glorious revolution. History had them entrained. And in due course, when hostilities resumed, it turned out the Starfish remembered who'd turned their backs when the chips were down.

I stood on yet another long, low hillside, snapper cradled in my arms, gray-green grass up to my knees, wind blowing, not quite hard, stirring the grass like waves in a sea, stirring my hair, white clouds like little puffballs scudding across pale blue heaven, sun an empty yellow orb at our backs halfway down the western sky, our shadows growing longer as the afternoon progressed.

Mr. Pommesfrites stood motionless and silent by my side, holding the game bag, three dead tilties collapsed together inside, watching. It was hot out, but the wind was cooling, so it seemed just about right. There was motion in the grass down below, but I waited for it to come a little closer.

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Across the valley, on a crag just this side of the white mountain foothills, was the crushed castle of some local lord. Maybe not the one I'd visited before. But just the same. I remembered how once Thôxdark had been a jewel from space, blue-gray-green. Tried not to remember the burnt-off patches I'd seen yesterday.

Or the black, blistered hole where the commercial cosmodrome had been, last time I was here.

Down below, the tiltie stotted, wobbling for just a second above the grass. As it disappeared, I lifted the snapper, easing off on the safety.

Maybe I'd hunted these same hills with General Bûnzolo, the two of us relishing our evening feasts of tiltie and rhôg, drinking brandy, chattering away, the general with his cigars of terragenic tobacco, all of it the gift of a matching biochemistry and Spinfellow adaptive medicine.

I thought the general looked like a miniaturized, water buffalo-based centaur, he thought I looked like a gigantic version of some little forest creature he'd promised me he'd show me in the zoo when we got back to the city by the spaceport. We both agreed the Firefoxes were assholes, and that the galaxy would have been better off if the Spinfellows and Starfish had killed each other off a long time ago.

If they had, humans and Thîxen, crawling sublight, would eventually have met, would have liked each other well enough, just like the general and I.

The grass rustled, forming a moving vee that pointed uphill, in my direction. I lifted the snapper.

Suddenly, Mr. Pommesfrites whispered, "How many of them can you eat, sir?"

The tiltie stotted again, spinning like a saucer above the grass, obviously seeing us. When it dropped, the vee formed again, heading downhill. I sighted in on the apex, knowing it would stott one more time and I would get it then.

God damn it. I *liked* these people. What's left of them now? A few hundred thousand, maybe a few million, out of all their billions, on scattered worlds, blasted and burned, not in war, but for punishment.

The tiltie did just as I expected, looking at me right through the gunsight, fell into the grass and took off. When I looked at Mr. Pommesfrites, he was looking at me. "None," I said.

He looked down at the game bag. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to spoil your fun."

I returned the safety and slung the snapper. "We'll give 'em to those people we found near where we landed the ship." A dozen starving refugees, living in crude tents made from blankets, in the shadow of a ruined castle. There'd been a village down by the river, maybe theirs, but it was burned away to nothing.

Hell, they're better off than humans were after the first war. Just a few years before the armistice, a Starfish fleet, frantic to cut off the flow of cannon fodder swamping them in battle, had found its way into human space and tried to clean the place out. Burnt whatever they could to a bloody crisp. Maybe one tenth of one percent of the civilian population survived, maybe less.

Which, during the lull, left a human civilization composed mainly of soldiers, maybe accounting for some of the things we did when the war resumed.

Still and all, I really liked them, these people.

Maybe one day the general would find his way home.

* * *

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From the bridge, with its isolated pools of instruments hanging against the dark, the star and its family of worlds were just like all the others I'd seen across so many years, planets like so many colored dots, all but indistinguishable from the fixed stars beyond, central sun a brilliant pip centered against the backdrop.

F10, the localnode said, when called upon. Slightly younger, slightly hotter, slightly smaller than humankind's home star had been. Slightly higher metallicity, born a bit later among the generations of the suns.

Five rocky worlds, spaced about as you'd expect. Six gas giants, none so large as Jupiter had been, two with gorgeous great ring systems, fresh and bright. A sparse population of relict planetesimals in-system, a few dozen large ice bodies circling in tilted, elliptical orbits beyond the outermost gas giant, scraping the inner boundary of the comet cloud beyond.

I bloated them one by one, remembering *Tammuz*'s interest in the varied ways a gas giant could present itself, so much more interesting than rocky terrestrial worlds, however laden with life.

Cheap stuff, he said. Mere chemicals.

Long a joke between us.

One of the gas giants, banded with pale yellow and soft gold, had a perfect, brilliant orange spot in its northern hemisphere, going round and round, sweeping up white eddies, spinning them about, spitting them out behind, reminding me of Jupiter, which I'd seen once in the days before the first armistice, *Tammuz* telling me how, once upon a time, the Great Red Spot had been really red, not the shrunken, washed out pink of modern times.

And I'd seen a datatrack of Jupiter being hit by a Starfish weapons system whose name nobody knew, blown away in a glorious bright steam of color and light, like pastel chalk dust caught in the wind, filmed by some pilot who'd gotten his ship safely out of the solar system that day, one of the very few.

They say the same weapons system, in the same moment, exploded the Sun, but no one made a record of that, or saw what became of Earth. No one who lived to tell, anyway.

Out in the datawarren, you could hear the Gozahghn Traffic Controller calling, asking my ID, wanting to know what business I had here. Even the machine minds seemed jittery and nervous now, however emotionless they were supposed to be. Primitive stuff, bought from the Spinfellows at a steep discount, thousand-year-old military surplus, or maybe cheap commercial junk the Firefoxes peddled, because the Spinfellows let them.

Two separate data streams suddenly spooled, one each in Spinfellow and Starfish diplomatic code. The war's over. Nobody won. Please don't hurt us.

Standing in space beside me, lit up like the consoles because the localnode considered him hardware, Mr. Pommesfrites whispered, "Really, sir, don't you think you ought to . . ."

I smiled. "They're unarmed. Not even home-grown domestics."

But that's not what you meant, is it? I told the localnode to answer them, which seemed to make him happy, Gozahghn itself swelling like a mottled ball in front of us, blue ocean, small green and brown continents, stripes of cloud showing where the weather fronts were, one tropical storm spinning near the limb. No ice caps. A few little moons, each no more than half the size of the one Earth had had, the last time I was there, most a lot smaller than that.

No sign of damage, the lucky bastards.

* * *

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I got *Tammuz* settled on the white concrete of the planet's only cosmodrome, cargo pods arraying themselves in a horseshoe around the control room, field modulus device breaking the links, lowering itself last in a gaudy splash of almost invisible blue ghost fire. Outside, the sky was pale and cloudless, arching not quite green overhead, sun a little silvery disk hanging above distant cityscape.

Morning, I remembered, Boroghwen Cosmodrome rolling up from the terminator.

Mainly, the place smelled of primitive technologies, other ships scattered widely around the many square kilometers of the landing yard, reeking of hydrocarbon fuels, the chemical tang of fresh polybutadiene rubber and ammonium perchlorate.

Mr. Pommesfrites said, "Oh, look, sir!" Pointing at one of the nearer spacecraft. It was a fat, truncated cone a couple of hundred meters high, and they had a big old steam crane set up next to it, busily lifting solid rocket motors from a flatbed truck, boosters like so many stacked logs, lifting them up to stand beside the cone, where antlike technicians clung, ready to bolt them on. "Can they really be so backward?"

I shrugged. "There probably wasn't any space industry here. I never visited Gozahghn before . . ." before all that, yes. "Probably just served by Firefox commercial interests, licensed from the Spinfellows, as usual."

Almost wistful: "I never really got around much, sir. We were kept in navy yards, when the fleet was in port."

And kept between the stars when it wasn't. I said, "You should've worked for the Company, Mr. Pommesfrites. I went all over the galaxy between the wars."

"Even the Starfish worlds?"

"Once. What was left of them."

"I wish I'd had the chance. But they only sell the old machines as surplus, you know."

A ground effect car stinking of methyl alcohol slid up, fans whining, bearings squeaking faintly as if to show their age, and settled, two tall, slim, scaly brown Gozahghnhen getting out, walking over with a delicate, high-stepping gait. They looked, I thought, like those old, old pictures of pleiosauri you sometimes see, the ones from that little time when sauropod structural dynamics weren't quite understood, standing a little taller than me, but not much, little heads craning down at the end of long swan necks.

You could hear them chirping a little bit behind the translators, making me wonder just where they'd bought the damned things. Datawarren reaches right into your head, but then things *are* falling apart. What little is left, anyway.

The one on the left gestured to the one on the right, and said, "This is the customs inspector, and I am the portmaster. Welcome to Gozahghn, honored human."

No way for them to tell of course. Even real humans had trouble. I held out my hand, relying on the machinery to let them know what it meant, even if they'd forgotten. "Crystal."

"Welcome to Gozahghn, Captain Crystal."

"Just Crystal, I'm afraid. I'm only a Company pilot."

That made their heads curl back, tiny eyes glinting in the sun. The localnode fished for information in the regional warren-fragment and found tracks that told me they knew the Company was no more, which I'd guessed but hadn't known for sure.

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I said, "I need a translight packet insert and a life support system recharge. Can you manage that?"

The portmaster said, "Well, sir." He looked over at my habitation modules. "I think your system will take our LSS fittings. But, sir . . . our overdrive maintenance supplies are *extremely* limited."

"I can pay."

"Sir . . ." the two of them looked at each other, snaky necks bending close, so that their heads twisted around. "The Spinfellow credit exchange is down. There's no telling when it'll ever come back up."

"I've got trade goods."

"Well . . ." more twisting necks. "There's not much of a market for luxury items here anymore. I'm sure you understand. With the collapse of the galactic economy . . ."

I told the localnode to open one of the cargo pods and led them over to where I had my scavenged military-grade field modulus device stowed. Obviously broken in pieces, of course, but also obviously all there, ready to be put back together and flown between the stars.

The one looked at the other, movements very stiff, then the customs inspector said, "Oh, sir! I'm not sure we can *afford* this!"

Don't do me a damn bit of good to know what it's worth somewhere else, if I can't get there from here. I said, "You fit me out for a long voyage, as far as you can manage with what you've got, and it's yours. That and enough local credit to see to my needs while I'm here."

The customs inspector said, "Where were you planning to . . ."

"Doesn't matter."

"Well. . . ." You could see him sorting through a list of his stores, somewhere back in his head, where it connected to whatever piece of the warren they'd managed to hang onto hereabouts. "Okay. I think. . . ."

"How much interstellar traffic have you been getting here?"

After a long silence, the portmaster said, "There are a half-dozen small freighters working locally, sir. The planets around here were very lucky. We've found three other surviving star systems within a few hundred parsecs."

Three. Out of how many? "Just those ships?"

"Well, no, sir. There was a Spinfellow high-liner through here a while back. A big one. They picked up a few strandees, only their own kind, of course, and moved on."

"Moved on where?"

"Far On High."

If the Spinfellow empire had a capital, that was it. I'd been there once, not long after the resumption of hostilities, picking up a hull full of frozen soldiers the Company'd contracted to carry into the battle zone. I almost got killed on that one, right off the bat.

I'd been amazed by Far On High, a spinning cylinder bigger than your average terrestrial world, following its own galactic orbit. A lot of humans had gone there after the armistice, not wanting to hang around on what was left of our own worlds. It's where all the trouble started, too, but I wasn't there then.

"So they think Far On High is still there?"

"We assume so. They didn't say."

If it is, then there's still an empire.

Then the portmaster said, "Once upon a time, many humans came here. Humans and Spinfellows. Firefoxes. Even Starfish." There was a sort of wistful trailing away.

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"Once," the customs inspector said, voice rather crisp and bright, "there was a whole quarter devoted to their . . . common interests."

Starfish and humans. The time between the wars. How could anyone forget?

By the time they left, happy with the bargain they'd made, carting away the stuff of their own starship, the sun had passed overhead and was falling down the afternoon sky.

It was a nice day for a long walk, Mr. Pommesfrites and I strolling through the old city of Boroghwen as Gozahghn's sun sank slowly toward the horizon, sky staining deeper and deeper green as it went. Apple green, I think. The color of some hard candies I remember a nice man gave me once, when I was fresh from the vat, *aoi ringo*. That's the one. Funny thing. Because in that language *aoi* also meant blue, the color of a certain kind of sky.

It was an old city, older than the spaceport I'm sure, though the Spinfellows could have come here a very long time ago, full of worn stone buildings, cobblestone streets with dusty ruts that must have been cut by the rims of iron-shod cartwheels, though the streets were full of boxy gas-turbine automobiles now.

There was a nice breeze, a sweet breeze sweeping in off the plains, maybe down from distant mountains, carrying away the dust, helping keep the streets clean. All the buildings were the same tan color as the cobblestones, not sandstone, though. Something else. It seemed brassy when you looked up, juxtaposing it against the darkening green sky, and the only discordant colors were on posters pasted here and there.

Funny pictures, not human-style, more like exploded diagrams, images of Gozahghnhen pressed flat, so you could see all sides of them at once, arms and legs and necks and tails outstretched, belly hide spread, as though skinned and nailed to a board.

Mr. Pommesfrites said, "Can you read them, sir? The localnode doesn't think I need to know."

Something between them I can't know. Something machine-to-machine. Gozahghnhen was vaguely Chinese-like, splatters of random marks the localnode said were core ideas, with lines of curlicues sticking out to right and left that had something to do with the twitters and cheeps of the local language, a kind of commentary about the idea in spoken words.

I said, "Most of them seem to be about something called the Flower Blood Festival. The subwarren has a lot of stuff about it that doesn't make much sense. Religious, I think."

Mr. Pommesfrites said, "It really is a beautiful day, sir. Don't you think? A fine, soft breeze. And I really can't remember *when* I've seen such a lovely green sky!"

What the hell does a welding machine know about lovely green skies? It was starting to get dark out now, sky turning more or less black above the buildings to our east, sun gone away, stars pricking bright white through the heavens, and the localnode let us know we were walking by hotels.

I was starting to get used to the subtleties of the architecture now, kind of a cross between Shinto temples, Hellenistic fantasies, odd patterns of stone like nothing ever seen on Earth. I picked one that looked, I don't know, just right.

Maybe some little subliminal urging from the localnode. It's hard to say how much it thinks, or even if.

There was a front desk inside, just like a human hotel, though maybe I never stayed in one of those, knowing them only from old layered-image counter-

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factuals, things on which I'd wasted my time during long rides between the stars. The little Gozahghnhen behind the counter didn't react for a moment, just staring through us. Invisible maybe? Things you don't expect often are.

Then he jumped, coming around the counter, eyes glittering, holding out both hands. "Honored human! Why, it's been so long since we've had one of your kind! Welcome to my hotel. I am the maitre d'."

The maitre d' took my hand in both of its own, shaking it just like a character in one of those old movies I used to dote on. "Welcome, sir, to the Historic Hotel Glory!"

"We'd like a room."

"Why, of course, sir! Did you choose the Glory because of it's glorious history?" It was fooling around with piles of paper on the desk now.

"History?"

The maitre d' spun to face me again, tail thumping on the side of the desk, and the localnode let me know the posture of its neck indicated incredulity. "Why, sir! This is the very hotel where Meyer and Sparrow vacationed for the last time before the revolution began!"

I saw Sparrow perform just once, that time I visited Far On High. Not something you'd want to see twice.

The maitre d' waved toward an empty expanse of parquet-like floor. "Why, this is the very ballroom where Wan Axe and the beautiful Hetaerrhÿë danced, the night before he decided humans were the key to the future of the Spinfellow empire."

"Some future."

The maitre d' froze. "Ah. Yes, sir. It's . . . easy to forget what's happened, isn't it, sir?"

"What about that room?"

He looked at Mr. Pommesfrites, neck forming into something like a question mark. Very hesitant then: "Is this one a being?"

"What difference does it make?"

"If a being, then it must pay."

"Merely a machine."

"Certainly, sir."

When I looked at Mr. Pommesfrites, his dish antenna was turned my way, blue eyes on my face, unblinking. Merely a machine? What does that make me, eh, my friend?

At night, there are more Gozahghnhen abroad in Boroghwen than during the day. I guess during the day they're all hard at work, maintaining a planetary infrastructure that'd been dependent on interstellar trade ever since the Spinfellows and their friends came here, however long ago. I'd've liked this place, I think, had I known it between the wars. Gozahghn has that same *primitive* feel I used to get on visits to human space, or among the Thîxen. Homey. That's the word.

Nighttime, the sky was spangled with familiar stars, the sky of a planet deep in a spiral arm, but not too deep, Milky Way arching up to quarter the heavens, thinnish and silvery gold, clotted just a little thicker in the direction of the galactic core. Mostly, the stars were etched in random patterns, though I could see one bright triplet, two white diamonds bracketing a vague sort of green that reminded me a bit of Orion's belt.

Childhood stars, for all the myriad worlds of human space were compacted into a region so small the constellations were all more or less the same.

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Sublight empires are like that, economical, without the superluminals' luxury of taking only the very best worlds.

After supper, the maitre d' so very proud he'd been able to scrape together the ingredients for a real human meal, even after all this time, Mr. Pommesfrites slightly indignant when one of the courses turned out to share his name, we stepped out into a cooling night.

No destination, I think, just . . . out and about.

Like old times.

Boroghwen had a different smell at night, cooler, damper, crowds of natives stirring the night air, alien animal tang competing for my attention with the methanol miasma of the cars.

Mr. Pommesfrites said, "Is it like a real human city, sir?"

"Real? I don't know. Humans had been living on ice-moons and inside deep space habitats for thousands of years by the time the Spinfellows found us."

"But not all of them, sir."

"No. I didn't get much downtime on real human worlds, however."

"I suppose not, sir." Diplomatic of him.

Up ahead, I could see a little gaggle of Gozahghnhen gathered on a street corner, gathered round a little display of some sort, some kind of vendor, picking over his wares, which seemed to be strings of bright glitter.

"Oh, sir! Is that a Firefox?"

I looked. Small, dark, furry, not quite quadrupedal. "No. Similar, though. Firefoxes have a pair of limbs attached to the sides of their heads that they use for arms." I checked with the localnode but it didn't know what this one was called either. "One more strandee, I guess. A Firefoxoid."

"Is that a joke, sir?"

"Yes." I guess they don't get many Firefoxes in the Spinfellow navy, especially not in the human squadrons.

The sky lit up behind me, off to the west, and when I turned to look, something was lifting off from the cosmodrome, climbing atop a column of firelit smoke. The gaggle of Gozahghnhen stopped playing with the foxy being's gewgaws and made little skirling and tootling sounds the localnode said it thought were the equivalent of oohs and ahs.

It took a few minutes for the thunder to reach us.

Imagine what it must have been like, living in the days when rocketships were the only way off a planet, when no one knew that on the other side of the nighttime sky some nasty things called Spinfellows and Starfish were at each others' throats, dragging down everyone else who'd come to play.

Beyond the vendor, we got into an area that wasn't so well lit, once the rocket's fire faded from the sky. Older buildings, with a kind of crumbly look, tattered posters hanging from their dusty stone walls. Something about this place.

Something familiar.

I put out a hand and smoothed one of the posters, lifting it upright again, turning up my night vision as far as it'd go. Not enough. "Mr. Pommesfrites?"

"Certainly, sir!" He hit the wall with a workspot, picking out the poster bright as day.

Most of it was Starfish barcode, zig-zag bands of color, dominated by broad, dark yellow stripes. Above that was a little strip of human-style picture, something shaped more or less like a human woman, though one obviously executed by an unfamiliar nonhuman hand. A naked woman, frozen in the attitudes of a dance.

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"Can you read it, sir?"

"No." And I shoved away the localnode before it could offer me a translation.

If you've got any sense, you'll run away.

Instead, I leaned close to the poster, and took a deep breath. Nothing. Whatever organic chemicals had graced this thing were long since leached away. Which is just as well.

I walked down a dark alleyway, one filled with scraps of rubbish where the wind couldn't reach to sweep them away, Mr. Pommesfrites casting a soft golden radiance just bright enough to light our way, bright enough to cast eerie moving shadows.

That's the ticket, Mr. Pommesfrites. Like ambient light from a scary old story.

Though the windows were boarded up, the entrance was broken open, making me invent tales about what life was like on Gozahghn in the post-war world. With the economy blown flat as can be, there'd be homeless Gozahghnhen sleeping in doorways. Beggars and whores, assuming they had the biology to support such a thing. Footpads, I think. An interesting word.

It was dark inside, Mr. Pommesfrites' radiance casting shadows far up into exposed rafters. Up there, you could see hanging bits of hardware, things with glassy lenses that had to be spotlights.

There was a stage on one end of the room, a pit before it with row on row of Starfish buckets for the audience. And, in the wings, smaller sections of seating meant for the sort of human who might enjoy this kind of thing.

What a place Gozahghn must have been, way back when.

I sat in the front row of left wing human seating, staring at the empty stage, looking round a room full of deep shadows. In back was the curve of a juice bar, lined with tubular Starfish buckets for the serum addicts.

I could almost see them now, as they had been, groaning softly as they took their injections.

As I recall, sometimes late-stage addicts would scream.

Creepy thing, a Starfish's scream.

Up front, on the stage, maybe a very rich Starfish, some holdfast lord who'd prospered despite their losing the first war, now a helpless addict squandering his starline's fortune, would pay to join the dancer on the stage.

And I remembered what it'd been like that day in Far On High, when I'd seen Sparrow dance with Starfish. I remember how I ran from the dancehall, stunned that the humans I'd once worshipped had fallen so low.

They say the dancers were born on the battlefields of the first war, when humans appeared in combat for the first time and Starfish soldiers went wild, throwing aside their weapons so they could get at them. A pretty day it must have been, human soldiers devoured alive by Starfish, while the Spinfellows killed and killed.

It's how they lost the war. By the time the Starfish found human space and tried to wipe us out, it was just too late. Maybe if they could've stuck to fleet actions, safe in the antiseptic sky . . . but wars aren't won by starships. They're won by soldiers. Not Nelson on the high seas, but Wellington in the peninsula.

Mr. Pommesfrites whispered, "Perhaps we should go now, sir?"

Remembering Sparrow dancing her dance, I felt a useless little spasm of desire.

And back outside, walking up the dark and dirty alleyway, I remembered another such alley, on another primitive world, back in the time between the wars. I remember I was all alone that night, walking half-drunk, when a

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Starfish derelict sprang from the shadows, engulfing me, slobbering, soft and sticky, grunting its Starfish words.

I remember how it backed away; I remember how the datawarren told me of its disappointment. I remember how it slunk off, deeper into shadow, and of how glad I was, just that once, for my accursed nonhuman genome.

Not human, the Starfish whimpered, *oh, damn.*

Over to the west, the sky lit up again, as the Gozahghnhen, busy as little Firefoxes, lobbed another payload aloft.

Nothing for it then but to walk back through the dark, home to Hotel Glory and sleep. Boroghwen was full of Gozahghnhen now, things that could call themselves people dancing in the streets. Maybe just cutting loose after a long, hard day's work, Gozahghnhen building their way free of the war's ruin, maybe even aware the war had set them free.

Then again, there was that Flower Blood Festival, and maybe that had something to do with a party of snaky-necks I saw, marching down the street, blowing things like lurhorns, though the horns made a squeaky chirp as if in imitation of Gozahghnhen speech. No sign of anything like flowers around here, nor yet any blood, but translators have their own secrets to keep.

Hotel Glory seemed a well-lit place when I got there, clean like the streets of the windy city, scaly brown people lining something like a bar, a *real* bar, I suppose, since it had once been meant for real humans almost like me, Gozahghnhen dipping their muzzles into low, flat glass dishes full of what looked like fat brown seeds, lifting their heads high, looking to the ceiling as they jiggled and swallowed.

There was a placard over the bar, words on it printed in an old human tongue, the one most widely used when I was new: "No Lizzies." Maybe the Gozahghnhen can't read it. Or if they can, maybe it's just local color now, and doesn't matter anymore.

Lizzies. Humans were like that, weren't they?

I headed for the stairs, wanting my room and bed, but the maitre d' caught me, placing a gentle, hesitant claw on my arm. "Honored sir?" Nervous about something, if the localnode got its neck language right. "There is a . . . machine to see you, sir. Something left behind at the cosmodrome, apparently." He gestured at Mr. Pommesfrites. "Perhaps your servant . . ."

My little welding machine swung his face to look at me, but I couldn't tell if he was amused by the job description.

"What kind of a machine?"

"I . . . don't know, sir. I never saw one like it before. Humanoid?" The localnode hesitated so long before supplying that last I clearly heard the Gozahghnhen chirp-tootle, warrentracks letting me know the long, low toot was what they called humans, the embedded warble encoding uncertainty, the chirp a modifier implying similar but not the same.

He gestured away then, and led us beside the bar and through an archway into the old dining room, lighting subdued and full of shadows. "Sir, this is . . ."

She stepped from deeper shadow, casting off splinters of reflected light, creating bright scintillae on the walls and ceiling, a vague, glossy, female human-shaped mannequin, the shape of a slim young woman cast as a bright chrome balloon. Slim silver hips and small silver breasts, a still, expressionless silver face with empty silver eyes, the shape of a woman, without all the salient details.

Mr. Pommesfrites said, "Why, sir! It's a silvergirl!"

The silvergirl stood mute, empty eyes on mine. I murmured, "So it is."

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The maitre d' said, "I'll send it away, sir, if . . ."

I waved him away, and gestured for the silvergirl to sit down at one of the tables. I can remember seeing them, though I never knew one personally. Mostly, in the old, old days, you saw them walking a few paces behind human women, in whose households they served, seldom with men, who apparently had no use for them.

"So. Who are you?"

She looked at me for a long moment, learning who knows what from my face. "I belong to the port authority maintenance depot. We heard there was a human ship here."

Some faint emphasis on the *human*. Well. From what I remembered of real human women, a silvergirl would be politic indeed. I said, "The ship is called *Tammuz*. I'm Crystal. Mr. Pommesfrites," I indicated the welder. "What's your name?"

She looked at the welder, and her silver lips made something like a smile. A little girl's shy smile maybe. "Pleased to make your acquaintance." Then back at me, "No silvergirl ever had a name of her own, just whatever milady chose to call her."

"So what do they call you here?"

She said, "I don't mean to be difficult . . . sir." That hesitation, *if you don't rate it, I don't mean it*. But when you want something, you have to be careful. "Gozahghnhen don't have names they tell each other, much less . . . and I'm the only silvergirl on the planet."

Mr. Pommesfrites said, "In the first war, we had some silvergirls in the fleet. Waiting table I think. We seldom saw them down in the tool shed."

She smiled at him again. "We were supposedly set free after the Centauri Jet business, but things didn't work out the way anybody expected."

No. I suppose not. I said, "What did you want with me, Miss Silvergirl?"

I could swear she dimpled at that, but with eyes as empty as two little pools of mercury, I couldn't tell much of anything. She said, "I was on a human world that made it through both the Jet conflict and the first war. My owners took me along when they were escaping during the big push, if you know about that?"

I nodded. Hard for me to miss, flying cargo after cargo of munitions from forward depots out to the firebases.

She said, "Our ship got caught in a fleet action crossfire. Everyone killed, I guess. Things that needed to breathe, anyway. I managed to hang on, powered down in a locker full of cleaning supplies, until we were picked up by a Firefox salvage team. I was sold here on Gozahghn, just before things went really bad."

I wonder if they saw anything, here on Gozahghn? It's been long enough, lightspeed images of some of the larger, closer explosions should've gotten here by now.

She said, "I got the night off so I could . . . try to see you, sir."

"What for?"

"Take me with you when you go."

For some reason, it took my breath away, reminding me of the little pang I felt, sitting in the old Starfish juice bar, remembering Sparrow's dance.

I said, "Can you pay?"

Mr. Pommesfrites whispered, "Sir. She's property."

"Cargo rate, then. Deck cargo, if you want."

Those empty liquid eyes stared into mine for a long time, but there was

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nothing in them I could relate to. I'm sure humans did that on purpose. Human women knew what was what.

She said, "The only way I can go with you is if you buy me from the port authority. I'm not worth much to them, unlike Mr. Pommesfrites here. I'm sure they'd let me go cheap."

Something about this thing was as appealing as a child, most likely deliberately so, but . . . "I don't think . . ." I stood up suddenly, looking down at her, and said, "I'm sorry."

I walked away, not looking back, went up to my room and undressed for bed in the dark, finally going out on the balcony, standing there naked in the soft, warm night breeze, looking out over the lit-up city, westward to where the spaceport lay, picked out in the floodlights' glare. If I waited a while, I knew, I'd see one of those archaic rocketships lift off.

Damned silvergirl. I've got enough to deal with.

Mr. Pommesfrites didn't come up for more than an hour, and didn't say anything when he did. I'm not sure why I was still awake.

Come morning, Gozahghn's silver sun climbing a cloudless sky whose green was so pale the day looked white, we went and did the tourist thing. On Gozahghn, in Boroghwen, at this time of year, that meant nothing but the training pens. Flower Blood Festival time, you see. Or maybe you don't.

For all that it lies on flat land, Boroghwen is in a beautiful country, sprawling across plains of dusty yellow soil on which, for many thousands of years, Gozahghnhen farmers have grown their golden crops, stuff as much like grain you might as well call it grain, checkerboard fields stretching out eastward all the way to a distant silver sea.

To the south of town, there are low, rolling brown hills looking out over the city, and that's where the training pens are situated, rail fences here and there, as well as many deep dugout pits, carved down into brown native stone, that same stone from which the buildings and streets of Boroghwen were made, cut down, then worn smooth over the ages, until it looked like they'd formed that way.

There were Gozahghnhen all over the place, teetering along narrow trails between fences, standing on stonewalled bluffs, looking down into the pits, twittering to each other in a mass of sound the localnode and translators made no effort to unravel.

Happy people, for whatever reason, chirping merrily away.

There was a broad field here on the flat top of one big hill, and things inside, arrayed in rows. Things with long, slender swords, like skinny needles that bent under their own weight. I could see they were a different species from the Gozahghnhen, with crests on their heads, shorter necks maybe. Something like ridges around their eyes. Webbed feet.

The localnode told me they were called Uhehghnhen. From a planet called Uhehghn, perhaps? No. Gozahghn originally meant just this region, a long time ago.

In front of them was a Gozahghnhen, also holding a sword, all dressed up in something like Kendo armor, making stylized movements with his slim, flexible weapon. The Uhehghnhen were mirroring his moves, some hesitantly, others with sweeping confidence. Slash. Parry. Stab. Retreat.

Near me, one Gozahghnhen said to another, "I do believe this year's crop is better than the last."

His friend said, "Some of them, at least."

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There were other Uhehghnhen clustered near us, sitting half curled up on the ground by the fence, resting perhaps, and when I suppressed the translator completely, I could hear them twittering together, chirps and cheeps exactly like the Gozahghnhen beside me.

I let the translator come back up, and said, "Excuse me."

The two Gozahghnhen's necks adopted vague corkscrew shapes, twists barely visible as seamlike lines the localnode told me showed reticence and deep reserve. One said, "Honored human?"

I gestured at the Uhehghnhen. "It sounds like they're talking."

The silent one kept his posture of reserve, but the other relaxed his neck, head coming down in apparent amusement. "Well, they make sounds like speech, but it isn't real words, you see."

"Ah. Thank you."

Off to one end of the resting row, two Uhehghnhen were in each other's arms, necks twined together like two snakes, heads cocked back, Caduceus-like, appearing to gaze into one another's eyes. Well. Neither the Gozahghnhen nor these Uhehghnhen have anything like external genitalia, and no telling what their mating rituals would be.

Or even if.

I listened to the little mewing sounds they made, sounding to my imagination like the cooing of lovers, and wondered if maybe the one was crying on the other one's shoulder.

I remember a wolf-girl I knew for a while, some really long time ago, maybe during the days when I was a cloud miner among the cold gas infrastars of the Orion nursery. She was a pretty little optimod, slim and sleek, with eyes like mother of pearl, who made little sounds like that when we made love.

I remember the gang boss was a really old human, so old and uncared-for he'd weathered away to a stick, condemned to work with us for some crime no one ever told. I remember he liked to call her Lassie, though she called herself Silver.

I can't remember what became of her now.

Funny what you remember, and what you don't.

After a while, the two Uhehghnhen lay down on the ground together, ignored by their comrades, and Mr. Pommesfrites and I moved on, heading for an overlook by an amphitheater-sized pit the localnode told us were the Rahghnhen grounds.

"Oh, sir! These are *much* bigger! And so *fierce!*"

If the Uhehghnhen and Gozahghnhen looked like species of imitation plesiosaur, these things, two of them, twice as large as the others, were like lovely, sand-colored allosaurs, complete with brown feathers over their eyes. There were Gozahghnhen down in the pit too, but they kept their distance, circling warily round, holding things like cat-o-nine-tails in their hands that sparkled with bright blue electricity, crackling softly when they moved.

There was a fellow over by the stairs cradling some kind of big gun in his arms, and another one at the top of the stairs, holding one just like it.

One of the Gozahghnhen jumped forward, swinging his whip in a quick arc, then jumping back. Sparks flared, spilling like fire on the sand and the struck Rahghnhen snarled, spitting hard words at its tormentor.

The translator made it say, "Bastard!"

Another Gozahghnhen stepped forward, whip glittering, and the Rahghnhen's companion made as if to intervene, but it said, "Stay back! No sense both of us getting hurt."

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I turned and glanced at the Gozahghnhen beside us, who'd tagged right along from the Uhehghnhen pen. The first one's neck was very stiff now, almost in zigzags, quite nettled at his friend's unseemly curiosity about the alien and his machine, but the other's amusement was now so pronounced his head had fallen almost level with his shoulders, neck forming a double loop.

"Did it speak?" I pointed down into the pit.

"Oh, honored human! The Rahghnhen imitate Latin as monkeys do men!"

Did he really say that? Perhaps not. The localnode is just getting a little uppity, absent proper maintenance.

Down in the pit, the two Rahghnhen were back-to-back now, vigilant, keeping their tormentors at bay, making me wonder if there might not be something worth seeing here after all.

The amused Gozahghnhen said, "Well, they've never seen Uhehghnhen, so they don't know what's to come."

His stiff-necked friend said, "And once they do, that's the end of them." He seemed disapproving somehow, as if there were something cheap about the whole business.

The shadows were growing long and the sky dark green again by the time we wandered on out to the cosmodrome. *Tammuz* was spread out on the concrete landing ways, her habitat and engineering modules peeled open and surrounded by port authority machinery, all waving black arms and snaky silver hoses, cargo modules lined up in a long, neat row, off to one side.

Mr. Pommesfrites said, "Oh, sir. I don't like the looks of that. Not at all." Genuine distress in his voice, maybe imagining the same mess made of himself, if he needed servicing here.

Besides which, they had the field modulus device all in pieces, more disassembly than the job required. So? We can take back our spare if they screw it up too badly.

Off to one side of the main landing hectarage, the port authority tool sheds were a series of long, low silvery buildings, no more than metal shells covering open space, their floors just sequestered bits of the landing field. It was in one of them that I found the Gozahghnhen I was looking for, sitting on his stool behind a big old gray metal desk off in one corner of the main machine shop floor.

From the single sharp bend, up near the top of his neck, you could tell the shop foreman thought I was mad, but then I was an alien, and he'd been around long enough to remember the heyday of Boroghwen, when humans and Starfish had mingled here by the thousand. If he'd been human, he'd have shrugged. Crazy aliens.

He said, "Well, wait here please. I'll go get her. And . . . communicate your offer to management."

Around us, the building was one great room, bridge cranes running on tracks across the cavern ceiling, platforms here and there bearing the half-gutted carcasses of spaceships, primitive and modern alike picked out by splashes of welder fire, and there were robots everywhere. More kinds of robots than I'd ever seen together in one place before.

Hodge-podge. Whatever they had on hand. Whatever they can buy from their surviving neighbors and wanderers who happen by. Mr. Pommesfrites was looking them over with what must be a professional eye.

Does he miss doing his job?

I do, suddenly.

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There was a multistage thing with big crystalline motors strung out along one wall, swarmed not only by machines, but Gozahghnhen. Here and there, you could see other beings as well, including a group of things like black ants I knew were called Araô. They'd been machine-shop workers for the Starfish in both wars, and who knows how a batch of them wound up stuck here.

Those were old-fashioned fusion motors, I knew, similar to the ones humans used when they first tried for the stars. Maybe the Gozahghnhen thought they'd be useful on Oort freighters? Expensive, though.

From a pile of hardware nearby, welder fire sputtered blue-violet, flickered and went out. Then an astonished voice called out, "Mr. Pommes*frites!?*"

He spun in place, face-dish searching like some antique radar, blue eyes popping. "Why, it's old Mr. Buffleduck! How *are* you sir?"

Another welding machine, not so different from him, a lot older, integument pitted, disentangled itself from a mess of shiny metal tubing and came stalking over, holding out a couple of manipulator arms for Mr. Pommesfrites to grasp. "Why, you young spud! I haven't seen you in a *valve's* age!"

Mr. Pommesfrites looked at me, blue eyes beaming, and said, "Mr. Buffleduck was lead welder aboard the old *Hyperion* when I first came on line, sir!"

I hadn't realized until then that my little welding machine was older than I was. Makes you wonder. The two of them huddled together, stalky arms gesticulating, voices muted, but obviously excited to see one another again.

I caught sight of the shop foreman walking back across the floor, headed our way, with the silvergirl just a few paces behind him. I couldn't tell when she caught sight of me. No visible reaction, anyway, and she stood quite still a couple of meters off when they got to the desk.

Funny. From far away, she looks more real than close up.

The shop foreman said, "Management agrees to your terms, so if you'll just run your authorization . . ." The silvergirl took a step forward then, but I still couldn't see anything in those empty, molten eyes. He said to her, "All right, you're sold, then. Let's hope he gets more use out of you then we did."

She took two more quick steps, standing a couple of paces behind me, still silent.

The foreman retreated to his stool behind the desk, shuffling up papers, curling his tail around the chair legs, and the translator had him say something like, "Personally, I think you paid too much. You could've dickered a bit."

"Thanks."

I took my silvergirl by the hand then, leading her away into the deepening green dusk. Behind us, Mr. Pommesfrites hung back for just a second, and you could hear the robots call out, first one, then another, "Pommesfrites! Oh, Mr. Pommesfrites! Ask him if he needs us, too! Surely . . . oh, please . . ."

The warm evening breezes were starting to cool just a bit as we walked away.

Toward the end of dusk, the sky was black, with long streams of fuzzy dark green radiating from the west, rising maybe a third of the way to zenith, the whole dotted with bright stars, first and second magnitude perhaps, the rest yet to come.

We were back at the Glory and I ordered my dinner delivered out on the balcony, looking out over the rooftops of the city, Boroghwen beginning to light up all around us. From this vantage point, you could see out over the plains to the west, and down to the hills south of town, now no more than hulking shadows, like the backs of so many great, sleeping beasts.

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Where the hell was I then? I can't remember the place any more. A planet of great, dusty continents and many small seas. A planet of great sweeping plains and long, low, eroded mountain ranges. Maybe its geochemical cycle had just ended, and not too many ages ago, for the air was still fresh, the world full of life, but the mountains were all ancient now, eroding away to nothing at all.

In my memory, the world is a soft, pastel blue-green, those endless plains lowing with herds of great gray beasts, marching endlessly toward oblivion.

Maybe it's still there.

Though invited, Mr. Pommesfrites declined to join us, begging my leave to spend "some time with my thoughts."

Odd idea. Or not so odd. Some long time ago, for whatever reason, some machine-tool designer needed his welding machines to think, gave them the power of thought, and so, to this day, they do so.

They brought the dinner, setting out the courses before me in warm covered dishes, uncovering the rice so I could see it steam, and brought the goblet my silvergirl asked for, full of some thin, golden oil.

That's another way you can see their origin. Human men would've given them the power to eat.

Among other things.

Rice. Some stir-fried stuff compounded of shredded pale meat, water chestnuts, an assortment of diced green vegetables whose names I didn't know, all of it giving off a complex miasma that evoked bits and pieces of distant memory. There was a place called *Gonggashan* where I'd been employed a long, long time ago, where there were smells like this. I think it was the last place where I was generally known for what I was.

After that, everyone accepted me as a man.

There weren't many optimods on Gonggashan in those days, and what few there were desperately fretted about becoming obsolete.

Useless.

The silvergirl leaned forward, an eyelid-like layer of silver rolling down over her eyes, and inhaled softly, taking in the steam.

"Ah," she said. "well done. But they've left out the *hoisin*. Something I don't know used in its place."

"I'm surprised they let you have a sense of smell."

The liquid eyes opened again, reflecting the light from the room behind me, seeming as luminous as a cat's eyes until she turned away, looking out toward the city, then softly said, "We always cooked for milady. A cook must have a sense of smell."

I laid a bed of rice on my plate and stirred the main dish with the ladle, releasing more steam, filling the air with brief snippets of fresh, sweet smell, making the silvergirl turn her face my way again. "Would you like a taste?"

She shook her head. "No sense of taste, of course. And no way to deal with most organics I put inside me." Not all oils are organic.

"Surely a cook . . ."

Another headshake. "Our designers knew taste is mostly smell, even in humans."

Right. I knew that. I couldn't think of anything else to say, filling my plate with food then, picking up the chopsticks, breaking them apart, surprised that my fingers remembered how to hold them even though I did not.

Across the table from me, the silvergirl picked up her goblet of golden oil,

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put it to her lips and sipped, eyes on me, but caught in momentary shadow, so my imagination, for once, supplied all the details her makers had not.

Slim.

Regal.

Self-possessed.

I had a woman once, a human woman who looked much like a silvergirl, an albino woman from some cold and lightless world, white of skin, white of hair, with eyes as pink as those of a pet rabbit. It was in the early days of my passing, and I thought I loved her.

She seemed to find me so deliciously erotic, so wonderfully exotic, even though she knew what I was from near the beginning.

Until finally I understood her need to soil herself. And understood that I was the dirt.

Out of the shadows, the silvergirl seemed to smile at me, setting her goblet down on the table, fingers curled loosely around the stem. "I want you to know how thankful I am for what you've done. I never would've gotten out of there any other way."

All I could do was nod, staring at her, trying to see how many forgotten women, human and otherwise, she could make me remember, as if no more than a template.

She said, "Why did you change your mind?"

"I don't know."

Expressionless or not, that seemed to make her uncomfortable. "What will you do with me?"

"I don't know."

She stared back then, the two of us motionless. "Am I permitted to know our destination?"

"Far On High."

For just a second, she looked up at the sky, now filled to overflowing with white stars, the Milky Way picking its golden track among them. "Do you think there might still be humans there?"

"I don't know."

Another long, staring silence, then she said, "I won't ask you what you wish for. But whatever you do, and whatever happens to me, I want you to know I'm grateful."

In the morning, I awoke to noise in the streets of Boroghwen and went naked out onto the balcony, silvergirl rising from the chair, where she'd spent her quiet night, to follow. Mr. Pommesfrites was already there, dish tipped forward over the balustrade, looking down into the street.

The sun was barely above the eastern horizon, swollen and oblate, like a fat ball of liquid metal, layers of dust in the sky stained a vague sort of blue, lesser turbulence of the morning air not quite able to scatter the light all the way to green.

Down in the street, things like dinosaur soldiers were marching, naked, crested, snaky-necked things carrying long, slim, flexible swords, holding them aloft, along with hanging vertical banners on poles, vaguely like the things you see in old historicals, carried by Roman legions, each banner a splash of meaningless color.

Mr. Pommesfrites glanced at me, and said, "Uhehghnhen, if I remember them right."

They marched steadily down the street, marching to the clash of

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deep-toned cymbals. No drums here. No horns. Alongside them, running down the sidewalks, Gozahghnhen scurried by the thousands, edging into the street, not quite blocking the marchers, chattering like a million inflamed magpies. Amid the marchers, I saw, was the occasional Kendo-Gozahghnhen in his padded armor, centurions, perhaps.

I hopped up on the railing, leaning out over the street, shading my eyes and looking down the line of march, Mr. Pommesfrites' hard metal fingers closing abruptly around one bare ankle. They were headed northwest, out of the city, and there, out on the dusty yellow plains north of the cosmodrome, I could see a broad round raised amphitheater, something like the Colosseum of those same old historicals, but wider, flatter. There were things like flags around its rim, in many colors, flapping in time to the vagaries of the wind.

The silvergirl said, "The Gozahghnhen at the machine shop have talked of nothing but the Flower Blood Festival for the past several tens of days. Apparently, the Uhehghnhen were their allies in the War to End All Wars."

The cymbal clashes were fading below as the last of the Uhehghnhen marched off to do whatever. When I looked down at the silvergirl, she was looking up at me, though due to the unrelieved wet silver of her eyes, I couldn't tell exactly what she was looking at.

Interesting.

What would I see, looking at a naked human, if the human in me was so limited as that?

Mr. Pommesfrites let go my ankle and I hopped down from the rail, walking back into the bedroom to get dressed. They followed me inside, and the silvergirl stood by quietly, handing me articles of clothing and helping put them on. Her fingers were delicate and deft as she buttoned up the buttons and snapped the snaps around me, buckling my belt on last as she knelt on the floor.

In the later part of the afternoon, long after lunch, we stood atop a low hill in one of the city parks, surrounded by Gozahghnhen whose heads bobbed up and down with excitement, necks flexing and jerking as the streets of Boroghwen echoed with screams of Rahghnhen rage.

Screams.

Hard to sort them out. The fictitious screams of datawarren drama: re-creations of ancient wars, desperate men going over the top to certain machinegun death; ancient disasters, men and women falling to lava in the streets of Pompeii.

Mr. Pommesfrites put his hand on my forearm, and said, "Oh, sir. I don't think we should be here!" Some old programmer, I think, had to work hard to give his voice that excited, breathless quality.

All around us, as the screams grew louder and more outraged, the Gozahghnhen grew more excited, slowly spreading down the hill toward the boulevard below. Some of them, I noticed, were picking up rocks. The silvergirl stood tall, craning her neck to see above the receding crowd.

She turned and glanced at me, then looked to Mr. Pommesfrites. "Watch what happens. It's . . . educational."

He said, "I don't need to see this. None of us do."

The first Rahghnhen emerged from a side street, bellowing, ribbons of heme-bright blood flowing down its flanks, recoiling, looking around at the gathering crowd. Behind him, there were other tall, bleeding figures, around their massive legs, the small, dark shapes of Gozahghnhen and the sizzling blue glitter of the electric whips.

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As I watched, one struck with a snap, making the nearest Rahghnhen jump and scream, while the translator supplied a gabble of bitter words.

Six of them.

Six Rahghnhen, surrounded by whips, recoiling against the façade of the building across the street, which the localnode informed me, apropos of nothing, was the Boroghwen central post office. I could see more Gozahghnhen inside, peeking out the windows, postal employees and their customers, no doubt.

Mr. Pommesfrites said, "Oh, sir. *Please* . . ."

Then the crowd surged forward, rushing the Rahghnhen, their mob voice deeper than the usual twitters and tweets, like a sudden rush of angry bassoons, blood-mad trombones. Rocks from the park and pieces of torn up paving cobble began bouncing off the bleeding Rahghnhen, who screamed and cowered, covering their eyes with their hands.

Behind them, one of the post office windows shattered, spraying the Gozahghnhen inside with broken glass.

Mr. Pommesfrites grabbed me by the arm, as if to drag me away, but I stayed to watch, along with the silvergirl, until the Rahghnhen ran on, heading out to the amphitheater, pursued by the crackle and snap of the spark-blue electric whips.

Other crowds, doubtless, awaited them along the way.

That night, by the light of another star-clotted sky, the city filled to overflowing with Gozahghnhen, many of them seeming to be stuck in that excited mode of theirs, necks cranking around wildly, heads pumping up and down, voices deepening as if flooded by hormones. Maybe so. The localnode had nothing to say about it, even when I asked.

They were streaming in across the plains, in convoys of cars, in huge, triple-articulated buses, the richer ones arriving at Boroghwen's little airport, a thing mainly used as a cargo terminal, off in one corner of the cosmodrome. The spaceships stopped going up too, workers abandoning their posts, robots at a standstill for lack of supervision.

Not that it was needed. Just that the Gozahghnhen weren't quite used to what they'd had. In the past, Spinfellows, or Firefoxes, at least . . . well.

When I checked, on toward dusk, work on *Tammuz* had stopped as well, but I found a shop foreman sticking to his post and paid him extra to come by and give the robots their instructions on what to do next.

"Fools," he'd said to me, neck in an angry knot. "All of them. And because of them, Gozahghn remains a vast cultural wasteland."

Then he'd looked up at the sky, and wondered what might have happened had things gone differently between the people of the Three Lands, all those many thousands of years ago.

All I could do was remind him that the Spinfellows or the Starfish, it didn't really matter which, would've come anyway, and then things would have turned out more or less as they had.

He'd given me a crook-neck look, and said, "Yes. But we'd have nothing to be ashamed of, at least."

What do you think? Does he imagine humans have nothing to be ashamed of, or merely know that they think so?

The evening passed in a haze of frenzy, the Gozahghnhen running about in increasingly wild crowds as they went deeper and deeper in their little bowls of narcotic birdseed, dinner made for me in a restaurant that could

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produce no human food, but managed to cough up some metabolically compatible treat that looked like a salad of burnt paper and tasted sweet, like desert coffee mixed with almond-scented massage oil.

Some time later, the three of us walked together in the city arboretum and Boroghwen began to quiet down all around us, ripe with the fading sounds of an orchestral horn section. One of the planet's little moons glittered in the sky now, a speck hardly brighter than a star, and if I stood still long enough, I could see it move.

Had the silvergirl not pointed it out, standing above a little lake on which things like scaly birds sailed in the darkness, I never would have noticed.

How many walks have I been on, just like this one?

I took the silvergirl's hand in mine, hoping it would help me remember, and her fingers were cooler than mine, but not cold at all.

Every world where humans have been, there are parks like these, and on many other sorts of worlds besides. Wherever there's a form of nature, and beings formed from that nature, there's an appreciation of the natural world.

Humans make parks where no parks could ever be. On poison worlds. On airless worlds. In metal habitats lost between the stars.

You'd think a being that could love nature would never be cruel.

But the Spinfellows have parks, and the Starfish too.

I turned suddenly and swept her into my arms, crushing her close, bending down to her upturned face, forcing her lips apart, and her tongue, when I found it, was cold indeed.

Behind us, I heard poor Mr. Pommesfrites whisper, "Oh, dear . . ."

Dear me.

She stepped back, not quite out of my clutches, looking up at my face, stars reflected, their light slightly smeared, in her eyes.

Then she said, "Though I haven't got the organ systems to participate, more than one human has found a way to rape me. Is that how you mean to convince us you're a real human being, Crystal?"

I let her go then, and tried to step back, but she stepped forward with me, staying close, and said, "If it has to be the price of my passage home, I'll pay it. I know you didn't have to come for me, and I don't want you to think I'm not grateful."

I held her close again, and heard Mr. Pommesfrites whisper, "Silvergirl, that's not what's happening here. Don't you understand?"

She stepped away from me, turning to regard him silently for a moment, then we walked on.

By noon the next day, silver sun hanging high, the stadium outside town was full as could be, hundreds of thousands of Gozahghnhen, at least, perched on the carved stone benches, tails coiled up in the little space between the back edge of the seat and the riser of the next tier.

It was, of course, that same brown stone that, when weathered, became yellow dust, carved in sharp shapes a very long time ago, worn now into the gentlest of curves. How long ago? I wondered, but the localnode couldn't say. Maybe the natives have forgotten, or maybe they just don't care.

The sun was hot, prickling sharp on my scalp, starting up little trickles of sweat as we sat and waited, looking around, well up in the tiers, maybe halfway to the wall, with its poles and banners. The Colosseum, I remembered, had had sunshades, once upon a time, but the Gozahghnhen aren't mammals, and maybe they don't mind the sun.

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Here and there, dotted at random around the audience, I could see others, other aliens, maybe one in ten thousand, maybe more, hard to say. A few rows below me was the fox-thing I'd seen selling junk in the streets a couple of nights back. There was a duplicate beside him, the two of them nuzzling close together, though I couldn't tell if they were making noises or not.

I wish.

Beside me, Mr. Pommesfrites began humming softly, hot air suddenly blowing from a small grill in his side. He glanced at me. "Sorry, sir. My refrigeration unit has started up."

I mopped my brow, wishing for a hat, and shrugged. Beyond him, the silvergirl was a bright mirror, scattering sunlight into the crowd. They didn't seem to mind, though looking at her made my eyes ache. When she looked at me, I wondered what her vision system was like.

What am I to her?

She got up and walked along the front edge of the tier, sliding in front of me and sitting down on my other side. She said, "If I'm up sun of you, there will be less glare."

"Thanks."

Below us, in the bottom of the amphitheater, a team of Gozahghnhen marched in a line, raking white sand in the smooth patterns of a Japanese rock garden, making me think of various blood-and-sand dramas, calling up a Death in the Afternoon microimage.

I wonder why they don't use Uhehghnhen for that sort of work?

And remembered the oblivious lovers in the Uhehghnhen pens.

Were those two among yesterday's marchers? Will I see them here today?

There were four doors into the arena, wooden doors I think, carved in patterns I couldn't quite make out, the ones to the south, east, and west small, the one to the north large. When the rakers were finished, they exited through the door to the south, and the crowd began to hush, toots and chatters dying away, heads turning to the empty tableau below.

The silvergirl leaned close to me, and I wished she smelled of something, anything. She whispered, "I was on Gozahghn for the last one, but I didn't get to see it. Thank you for bringing me."

The north door slid open with a hard scrape and six Rahghnhen were driven out, blue whips sparkling in the darkness behind them, stumbling out onto the white sand, blinking, pawing the air, kicking up little clouds of white dust.

They must have to bring in new sand, I thought, or the yellow dust would settle here. I wonder where they get it? Some place far away, a different geological province. One of the Three Lands, but not this one.

The Rahghnhen walked slowly out to the middle of the arena, looking around, up at the mass of spectators, and you could see the damage yesterday's march through the city had done. There were crusts of blood on all their flanks, and two of them, I saw, were limping badly.

They gathered in the middle, almost huddled, growling softly to one another, and all around me a gentle twittering resumed.

One of the Rahghnhen beckoned to the others, pointing this way and that, especially to those doors on the east and west. The neck of one of the Gozahghnhen seated in the tier immediately before me jerked spastically and he nudged his companion with a claw, modulated caw translating as, "Look! That one *knows!*"

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It was exciting others in the crowd, the noise level rising, and the one who was nudged said, "Well. *This* ought to be interesting," the comma-shaped arc of his neck expressing deep satisfaction.

Behind me, someone whispered, "Serves the downkiller right. He had it too easy last year!" Interesting how the translator makes up words in its effort to grapple with meaning.

The Rahghnhen down below continued to gesticulate, and now they separated into two groups, three each going to stand before the doors on the east and west. With that, the general sound of the audience swelled, friends arguing with friends, necks whirling, heads jumping, and you could hear deeper pitched hoots emerging from the skirl and roar.

Mr. Pommesfrites whispered, "Some of them seem upset, sir, while others are glad."

The silvergirl, voice somehow dry, said, "Some will root for the lion, others for the gazelle."

I looked at her, but she was watching the Rahghnhen below. "Were you ever on Earth?"

She glanced at me and shook her head. "My first family were wealthy Sirians before the Centauri Jet conflict. We had game parks and zoos, and I led a team which assisted with the children's education."

"Hunting?"

She looked at me again, then back down below. "I hope they kill him," she said.

I said, "Was that the same family you were with when . . ."

"No. They were on the losing side of the Centauri war. I was sold off by the reparations committee, right after the Glow-Ice Worlds business."

There was a loud scrape from down below and the two doors slid open, the whole amphitheater erupting as the Gozahghnhen screamed, the sound of some enormous flock of birds, half crows, the rest harpy eagles. It made the two teams of Rahghnhen flinch visibly, but they were ready nonetheless.

Uhehghnhen sprang from the darkness, darting forward with their long, flexible swords, necks held well back on long, desperate curves. Where are the centurions? I wondered.

And then the six Rahghnhen were all fangs and claws, a mist of blood blossoming as those first brave Uhehghnhen were transformed without interval from living things to bits and gobbets of dark red meat.

The Rahghnhen retreated toward the center, some of them grabbing up swords, waving them around, obviously unused to such things. The one who'd emerged as their leader howled at them, and they threw the swords down in the sand, crouching together, baring white fangs, claws curving from their hands like knives of bright crystal.

They were splashed with blood, the Rahghnhen, Uhehghnhen blood, and there were flowers of blood darkening the sand, a bouquet round each of the doors.

"Smart," said the silvergirl. "Smart as can be. This downkiller will have a very bad day."

The Gozahghnhen in front of us jerked, obviously angry, and twisted to stare at her, but his friend maintained his posture of satisfaction. "However bad his day becomes, it won't help them. Or us." He looked at her curiously. "Are you a being or a robot?"

She said, "Both."

The crowd howled again, and down below I saw Uhehghnhen marching

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through the portals in full military array, rank on rank splitting as they emerged into the sunlight, spreading around the walls of the arena, surrounding the six Rahghnhen. Behind them, the armored Gozahghnhen crouched, calling out commands.

The localnode let me know the Uhehghnhen were terrified.

Doubtless, down there, it smells of blood from the ones already killed, already torn to pieces, nothing you'd recognize left behind.

Mr. Pommesfrites whispered, "Can we go now, sir?"

But we stayed and watched as the set piece played out, watching as the Uhehghnhen died by the dozens and hundreds, pathetic little swords flicking forward, cutting the Rahghnhen but never killing them, while the centurions, rear-echelon safe, sent them forward again and again.

In the end, the silvergirl got her wish. But however bad a day the Gozahghnhen downkiller had, marching out on the bloody white sand once the Uhehghnhen had done their job, it was nothing compared to the day those six Rahghnhen went through.

It was sundown before we went home.

As the sun went down and the sky stained green, it seemed as though the warm wind blowing out of the northwest was filled with the smell of fresh blood. Crowds of Gozahghnhen streamed from the amphitheater, flooding into the city like drunken migratory geese, and it was hard to say if they were happy about what they'd seen.

Certainly, as the downkiller was carried from the field and taken away by ambulance, they stormed from the stands, down onto the sand, and tore the six Rahghnhen to pieces. Not that it hurt them any, they being already dead.

No one helped the Uhehghnhen lying in the sand either, and some of those were still alive.

One comment I heard, over and over, was, "Wait 'til next year! Just wait 'til next year! We'll see something *then!*"

The silvergirl took my arm as we walked along the road back to town, giddy Gozahghnhen flowing around us like so many tiny alien pebbles carried along by their stream. Mr. Pommesfrites was quiet now, walking along behind us.

Somewhere along the way, she said, "Did you enjoy yourself?"

I looked at her. Useless. What little detail there was had been washed away in the dark. Now, she was no more than a girl-shape, picked out by reflections, the stars, the city lights, the headlamps of the cars that were threading through the crowd. "What, you think there's some lesson here to be learned?"

She shrugged, hugging close to me, making my arm feel cold. "I was glad when the downkiller got hurt."

"And what good did that do?"

From behind us, Mr. Pommesfrites said, "It was horrible, sir. I wish we hadn't come."

South of us, the cosmodrome suddenly lit up, chemical fire boiling bright white around the base of one of those new-minted hybrid rockets, then it was climbing for the stars, black smoke lit up red from within marking the trail of its passage.

"Back in business, I see." I looked over my shoulder at the welding machine, and said, "There's nothing for us back at the hotel but to sit around

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and sulk about things that don't matter. Why don't we head on down to the pad and see if we can't expedite the *Tammuz*'s refit?"

He rose up a little higher on his stalky metal legs, and said, "Oh, *gladly,* sir! Yes, let's do that!"

The silvergirl slackened her grip and let her arm slide down until her hand was holding mine. "Do you really think these things don't matter?"

I looked over at the town, Boroghwen all lit up by merrymakers. "They do. But I can't imagine what anyone will ever do about it."

She said, "The instrument can't partake of the guilt. That's all we really need to know."

I looked down at her, down at our linked hands, wishing like hell I could see something, anything, of the real being within the shiny liquid metal shell. "Is it? Is it really?"

In the wasteland between the stars, it's as though nothing ever happened. I can go out on *Tammuz*'s hull, and but for his absence, but for the uncanny silence, all is as it was. For all I know, we could be on our way from Stardock to Firehaven, carrying some Company cargo the Firefoxes will sell in our name, taking their cut, handing back our meager profit.

But that won't always be so.

I was near some of the battles.

I know how big they were.

Someday, beings beyond this galaxy, huddled round some primitive sun in a far off cluster, will stare through their telescopes and wonder just what the hell went on here.

Even now, lightspeed flowers of fire are growing, their images winging outward, glittering in the skies of first one world, then another. *We* won't need a festival to remind us of what happened. We'll see it all around us, and I wonder how we'll feel then.

I was up by the docking mechanism, up where the field modulus's glow was like so much quiet gegenschein, sprawling under the starry sky, when Mr. Pommesfrites came over the horizon, walking on stalky legs until he could settle by my side.

Something very like a sigh. "It's always seemed so very beautiful, sir."

I looked at him, at the matrix of beams and girders and monofilament cables, at the incongruous blue-eyed face some designer had stuck in the middle of his sensory antenna, just for fun. "Do you really have those feelings, Mr. Pommesfrites? Why is that?"

The dish turned my way, blue eyes dark and serious. "We have our feelings because they were put there by men. You know that, sir."

I looked away, back up at the stars, bitter bile taste rising in my mouth. "I always wanted my feelings to be my own."

"So do I, sir. But they aren't. They were put there, on purpose, by human beings, for their own reasons."

"Human beings who, for the most part, must be dead now."

"Maybe, sir, our feelings are all that's left of those men. All that anyone will remember them by."

Maybe so. But as we flew toward the center of things, the datawarren traffic was picking up, bursts of static in the silence, bursts of meaning in the static as the survivors began picking themselves up from the ruin.

Someday, what we've been through will be no more than history, and who will remember us then?

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The silvergirl was out here too, walking alone under the starry old sky, walking toward us now over the blue-lit horizon, coming to stand beside us, facing me, looking down.

If I slit my eyes just right, she looks like an old friend.

"Why don't you sit down?"

Not that she'd need to. Not human enough for that.

She said, "I'm sorry for what I said to you, that night on Gozahghn. You look so human, Crystal, that it's hard for me not to hate you."

The memory of it was already no more than a sliver from a dream.

I said, "Have you thought of what you'll do, if we get to Far On High and it turns out really to be there?"

There was a long silence, far longer than any processor could conceivably need for any realistic task. They tried so hard to make us like them, didn't they? In His image. That's all.

She said, "Go on looking."

No need to ask for what. Me too.

I said, "Did you ever hear of Silver Forge?"

Another long silence. "It's just a story."

"Maybe so."

After a minute, she turned and walked away.

Mr. Pommesfrites said, "Is it just a story, sir?"

Is it? And am I just hurting her for the fun of it, like a *real* human being?

"We'll know soon," I said.

The old habitat spun against the backdrop of stars and black sky, running lights dark, as if derelict, surface lit up by the flickering pale blue glow of *Tammuz*'s field modulus exhaust as we closed in on one of its axial docking stages.

Not a Spinfellow habitat, nothing so grand as that. Some old human thing, a Company depot maybe, abandoned as junk some very long time ago.

The three of us stood on the invisible floor of the command module, instrument consoles lit up around us in space. Mr. Pommesfrites was lit up too, as I was not. The silvergirl? I don't know. Some pale gray half-light, as if the localnode couldn't quite make up its almost-mind what she was.

Tammuz would have known.

The cylinder turned end-on as we approached, modulus light brightening steadily. Suddenly a navigation beacon started to blink above the north polar stage. The silvergirl didn't say a word, or move, but there was something in the air just then, a tension at least.

The ship swept in, components separating gracefully, gliding above their own shadows, settling here and there, then the docking probe extended gentle lips to kiss the mouth of the entryway.

I looked at the silvergirl, and said, "You never really believed in it, did you? Or me."

She looked back with those same familiar silver eyes, as liquid and empty of life as ever, and said, "No."

Inside, Silver Forge was pretty much like that old wreck of a habitat where Mr. Pommesfrites and I had gone paragliding among the airspyders so very long ago. Below us, below the foothills of the faux red sandstone endcap mountains, you could see jungles of green, forests of flowers, trees run

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wild, rivers run out of their courses, seas that had long ago spilled, creating great, fantastic, silver-glittery swamps everywhere.

But the stemshine glowed yellow white for its whole length, fading away into the mists, casting bright light in long golden rays down on the lands below.

Cities, I think. Places where humans once lived, living out the pretense that this was a world, just like the one they'd left behind them. All gone now.

In the distance, made tantalizing in the haze, at the foot of a tall, cone-shaped mountain, a white cone from which a little flag of cloud spun out into the wind, rose what looked like the skeleton of a building. Something new. Or else something very old.

From not far away, Mr. Pommesfrites called out, "The elevator's here, sir! It seems to work!"

The silvergirl went ahead of me, not quite hurrying.

Finally, we stood, the three of us, in a strip of grassy land between the red rubble below the foothills and the beginning of the wild green forest, not far from where the elevator had let us off.

The silvergirl stood just a little bit ahead of us. Waiting. And who knows what she expected.

Then you could see them out there, glinting among the trees, coming forward, stepping out into the sunlight, glittery and shining just like her.

She took a step forward, then another, crouching as if to run, hesitated and turned to look at me with those featureless eyes. One step back and she threw her arms around me, holding me close for only a second, then she turned away again, and this time ran, all the way across the clearing until they gathered her in.

What the hell programmer put *this* in me, then?

Answer me that.

My silvergirl turned back one last time, raised a shiny silver arm, and waved good-bye, then they melted into the forest together and were gone.

Mr. Pommesfrites said, "Oh, please don't cry, sir!"

I looked at him. "Sorry." We turned away and started walking toward the elevator. Time to go.

As we rose back up the face of the endcap mountains, looking out across a tangled green inside-out world, back toward the white mountain and its skeletal building, he said, "Who knows, sir? Maybe when we get to Far On High, the Spinfellow technicians will know how to revive the ship's imago. Then think of all the company you'll have!"

"I'd like that." Yes, I would.

There was a hesitancy in his machine-made voice, as he said, "Maybe . . . maybe even humans?"

"Humans." Hard to imagine myself seeing them again, pretending to be one of them.

"Optimods?"

"Maybe so."

And maybe, sometimes, letting go is the only right thing to do.

He said, "Whatever happens, sir, you'll always have me, won't you?"

I put my arm around the shoulders of a man, however much he might be made from cylinders and beams and monofilament cable, and tried to imagine the shape of friends to come. ❍

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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

But Mainly by Devotion

The first time I registered the byline of John Dalmas was thirty years ago. The cover of the May 1970 issue of *Analog* bore a wonderful Freas painting—mounted, chainmailed Viking warrior against a backdrop of shattered skyscrapers—to illustrate Dalmas's "But Mainly by Cunning." I recall nothing of Dalmas's actual story at this remove, but the conjunction of painting and title and byline seared his name into my cortex.

Over the years, I would occasionally see reference to his subsequent work, and experience a certain niggling desire to re-sample his prose. But time and tide, proclivities and permutations all insured I would not find the opportunity.

Now, thirty years later, Dalmas's new novel comes into my hands, and I suddenly realized that in a way, his career epitomizes a certain path once common in SF, that of a journeyman worker in the shadows cast by bigger luminaries, a solid, hard-laboring toiler in the SF vineyards who continues to produce readable, entertaining novels more out of love than any desire for riches and fame. It suddenly seemed a shame not to read him.

Dalmas was just beginning his career in 1970, his earliest stories appearing in 1969. Prior to that point, under his real name of John R. Jones, he worked as a research ecologist. Born in 1926, Dalmas was close to fifty when his first book appeared in 1971. Now, of course, he's hit the three-quarter-of-a-century mark. The inside copy on his new book credits him with eight other novels from his current publisher, Baen Books. All this without significant review coverage or awards hoopla. Now, if this record does not bespeak an uncommon dedication, I'm Edgar Rice Burroughs.

But what of the book at hand? If disposable and ill-wrought, then all this perseverance avails naught . However, such is not the case.

The Puppet Master (mass-market, $6.99, 407 pages, ISBN 0-671-31842-X) is really the titular novel of nearly three hundred pages sandwiched between two linked novellas, "A Most Singular Murder" and "The Case of the Duplicate Beauties," the first one previously published. All concern the professional activities of Martti Seppanen, a private investigator in the early twenty-first century of a timeline mildly displaced from ours by certain inventions, mainly a working antigravity device, and by a mass die-off from plague.

The first story focuses on the murder of an astronomer who acquires a lot of enemies by his seeming proof of the validity of astrology. The novel—despite the Heinlein homage of its title—does not involve parasitic alien invaders but rather the disappearance of Ray Christman, the founder of a popular cult that Dalmas models almost exactly on Scientology. And the final contribution tells of a strange series of incidents featuring newly twinned people whose unwitting duplicates are hijacked for illicit purposes.

Dalmas builds believable, rounded characters and sets them in a

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fairly solid and interesting future, notable mostly for his extrapolation of religious fads. Besides Christman's New Gnostics, we also encounter the COGS and the Institute for Noetic Technology, all vying against each other in a complicated battle for dominance. Less is made of the changed societal landscape brought on by the plagues and antigravity, and in fact sometimes we can forget we're not inhabiting our own timeline, as far as institutions and cities and culture goes.

One thing Dalmas does do is to try to open up traditional physics to include psionics and other arcane matters such as astral travel. In fact, this is the main thrust of his narrative. Martti's wife Tulli is a professional psychic and plays a large part in all three cases, along with an assorted cast of fellow oddballs. This blend of physics and extrasensory talents derives, of course, from Campbell's heyday, and despite all evidence against such a synthesis, its allure continues to manifest.

Dalmas's prose is not rife with overblown metaphors in the PI tradition. The wildest he gets is this: "Beneath the typist's fingers, the keyboard sounded like a popcorn popper having an orgasm." And even such similes are infrequent. In fact, Martti is a rather stolid fellow, ingenious enough, yet most happy when chowing down high-calorie treats. Slow to anger yet deadly when he or his wife is threatened, Martti plays by the rules and exhibits a deep concern for keeping civilization safe, yet still manages to get the job done.

I'm betting John Dalmas himself is a lot like that.

Tales from the Darkling Isles

Time now once more for our survey of British SF and Fantasy. Let us swoop down to treetop level and catalog several giant specimens of the old growth forests in the land some know as "The Darkling Isles," to employ Richard Calder's somewhat jaundiced appellation. (Note that British editions of books not yet published in the USA may be obtained easily and at reasonable costs from amazon.co.uk, who happily ship across the Atlantic.)

Shortsighted US publishers have frozen the prodigious fevermeister Richard Calder out of the domestic market, with the noble exception of Four Walls Eight Windows, who will soon be bringing out the first US editions of Calder's *Frenzetta* (1998) and *The Twist* (1999). But Calder's latest two books, both among his best, have no US releases set, and there's a third one on the way, compiling a recent series of stories from *Interzone*. So let's catch up.

I found 2000's *Malignos* (Earthlight, mass-market, £6.99, 359 pages, ISBN 0-671-03720-X) a more thrilling and smoothly flowing book than 2001's *Impakto* (Earthlight, mass-market, £6.99, 359 pages, ISBN 0-7434-0895-0). Nonetheless, the latter certainly wins high marks for conceptual audacity and for its knockout opening section.

In *Malignos*, we once more find the type of star-crossed lovers whom Calder employs so fruitfully. Richard Pike, human warrior and demon-slayer in a far-future world gone rotten with biological monstrosities, has fallen in love with a turncoat female demon named Gala. When his lover's mind is stolen away by her vengeful subterranean kindred, Pike must journey to the literal center of the wormy earth to find a cure for her condition. His journey (reminiscent of Michael Shea's *The Mines of Behemoth* [1997]) is lurid, gripping, and emotionally wrenching. As if Clark Ashton Smith had collaborated with

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William Hope Hodgson, this book evokes a kind of lusty angst and frenetic ennui that is, ultimately, refreshingly upbeat.

Impakto is a teratoid of a different color, similar to the cosmic parables of A.A. Attanasio, blending the occult with the stefnal. Calder's first book to be set squarely in the present day (at least in its opening and closing chapters), *Impakto* benefits from explicit allusions to cinematic, artistic, and literary touchstones that until now in Calder's work have had to be veiled, out of deference to the verisimilitude required by futuristic narrators. However, our narrator here, Raul Riviera, is a somewhat ineffectual middle-aged man resident in the Philippines who discovers that he is really a kind of spirit creature, an *impakto*, the revenant of an aborted child. This revelation is delivered to Riviera by a fellow *impakto* in a scene involving the terror-filled crash of an aircraft in flight, a scene that presciently and forcefully invokes recent national tragedies.

Blithely tossing aside his old life for his new role as avenging warrior fated to harrow the halls of a very real Heaven and Hell that lie just next-door to our universe, Riviera becomes besotted with his own nonhuman paramour, Maximilla Morales. But Maximilla's absence from much of the action, after her capture by the forces of Heaven, deprives this story of a central pulse. Additionally, as a somewhat stolid fellow, Riviera realistically does not indulge in many of the vivid verbal flourishes Calder's narrators traditionally employ. And a tiny superfluity of theological talk also undermines the action.

Still, both of these books, appearing so swiftly back to back, stand as a potent achievement in the opening days of the new century's fantastical fiction. Calder proves that he's supreme at conveying "the landscape of my imagination where, dreaming, I had encountered dreams not my own, but which, unlike the landscape of home and identity, had never disowned me."

Like Sarah Singleton's recent *The Crow Maiden* (2001), Gus Smith's *Feather and Bone* (Big Engine, trade, £8.99, 307 pages, ISBN 1-903468-03-5) ventures into what might be termed Robert Holdstock territory, exploring the supernatural marvels and terrors that exist in the English countryside. Exist now, and have existed for uncounted, ignored millennia. All these books convey a sense that immemorial traditions and practices persist among our rural cousins, who are portrayed as having a deeper connection to bygone ways—for both good and evil—than we urban dwellers do. In a sense, then, these books represent a kind of counterforce to the popular vein of "urban fantasy," forming an assertion that only those intimately connected to the soil and nature can deal with the cosmic forces that have preceded mankind and will probably outlive us.

Surely a more primitive existence cannot be imagined than that of the Northumberland family who is the central focus of Smith's tale. Bessie is a slatternly, ill-tempered mother and wife, whose continual cleaning of the small impoverished cottage her family inhabits is more a sign of mental sickness than of propriety. Her husband Angus is an ineffectual wood-worker and poacher, whose growing feeble-mindedness is eventually explained as a certain medical condition (kept secret here in this review so as not to spoil the mystery). Son Davie is an innocent but cipherish toddler. Finally, daughter Isabel is the linchpin of the family dynamics. Gifted with extrasensory perception and a sensi-

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tivity to the otherworldly goings-on in her wild region of the country, Isabel will prove pivotal in dealing with the emergence of an evil spirit known as the Duergar.

Other major players in this game are Allison, a government official dispatched to this community to deal with an outbreak of BSE (also known as Mad Cow Disease); Keith, a nosy reporter out to uncover any dirt; and Rose, a relative newcomer whose white witchery will help save the day.

Smith nails his characters and countryside with precision. All the inbred suspiciousness, as well as the generous openheartedness, of his citizens comes across distinctly. The harshness of this kind of hardscrabble country living is nicely tactile. Additionally, he moves his story along at a smoothly varying clip, alternating slow and suspenseful passages, mimetic and fantastical.

In terms of gore, Smith shows admirable restraint. Two incidents involving the deaths of major characters make the plunge into real gruesomeness. But by the time these passages occur, the reader has been prepped for them and not overwhelmed by earlier gratuitous occurrences. And Smith shows some intriguing dimensions by blending quasi-scientific and supernatural explanations of the Duergar and its astral plane, allowing the reader to chose which explanation suits them best.

All in all, a shivery read, authentic and honest.

Contact **Big Engine** at *www.bigengine.co.uk*.

Geoff Ryman's got big bollocks.

There are certainly very few authors in our field who would be daring enough to structure a giant contemporary urban fantasy novel around casual sex. Fewer still who have the talent to bring off the attempt with grace and compassion and empathy. But that's just what Ryman does in *Lust* (Flamingo, trade, £9.99, 400 pages, ISBN 0-00-225987-7), and the result is a class act, as far from sleazy as possible. Thoughtful and erotic, melancholy and comic, despairing and hopeful, Ryman's book echoes his previous one, *253* (1998), in its unstinting exploration of the wide variety of human behavior.

Resident in London, Michael Blasco is a handsome thirtyish biology researcher (all due irony attaches to this profession) who also happens to be gay. Unhappily partnered to a man named Phil, Michael has sublimated all his unease and discontent (much of which extends back to a traumatic childhood, when he bounced across the Atlantic between divorced parents, an English mother and an American father) into workaholic habits. But his carefully structured cagelike existence is about to explode. One day Michael discovers he's been granted a unique power by a whimsical universe. Any time he wishes, he can mentally summon up a fully corporeal duplicate of anyone he's ever lusted after. Male or, more rarely, female; living or dead, these doppelgangers possess all the memories and qualities of the originals, but are totally subservient to Michael's commands—should he choose to override the autonomy of his "Angels," who exist only so long as he wills.

At first, of course, Michael fears he's going insane. But his training in logic and experimentation takes over, and by the halfway point of the book he's convinced himself—through many erotic trials, some awkward, some satisfying—of the reality of his new talent. At this point, his character undergoes a change, as he loses his timidity and caution and plunges into several wild relationships, most notably

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with a revenant Pablo Picasso. But Michael's foray into unbridled hedonism eventually proves his undoing, and a denouement finds him struggling to recover from nearly dying, and to assign some meaning to his whole odd experience.

In the tortured yet fey Michael Blasco, Ryman has created a character of astounding depth. Overturning all stereotypes of gay life, Ryman fashions a rich backstory for Michael that leads inevitably to his current condition and quandary. Nor are the subsidiary characters slighted. Just the recreation of the domineering genius of Picasso alone would suffice to earn Ryman much credit. And Ryman's transparent yet chromatic prose style, replete with striking similes and metaphors on every page ("Everywhere Michael touched him there were little pinpricks of body hair, like mustard on ham."), makes the reading of this novel an easy, fluid joy.

As indicated by its chapter titles, which all come in the form of a question, this book is predicated on mystery—the mystery of "desire, perhaps the biggest miracle of all." Michael's exploration of his own lusts—lusts we all share—eventually leads him to a kinky physics, a theory of erotogravitics, an extension of his experiences that some might find natural, and some an artificial attempt by the author to transform the personal into the cosmic. But one thing is certain: Michael has gone through the fire and emerged out the other side with new knowledge.

Flavors of the equally innovative work of Thomas Disch and Samuel Delany, of Will Self and Jonathan Carroll, of Phil Dick and Robert Silverberg (specifically the latter's *Dying Inside* [1972]) all pepper this tasty carnal banquet served up by Ryman. But only he could have concocted such a tantalizing recipe.

* * *

Everyone knows that Michael Moorcock, though resident in Texas these days, is still in love with London. The eternal city on the Thames has afforded him with characters, themes and settings aplenty, and his latest collection, *London Bone* (Scribner UK, trade, £10.00, 248 pages, ISBN 0-684-86142-9), conveys his vast affection in eight stories and one essay, with several of the fictional pieces centering around his eccentric von Bek/Begg clan.

"London Blood" is cast as the rambling memoirs of an old actress, a seemingly innocent account, yet one that harbors dark depths of old child abuse. "Doves in the Circle," an Avram Davidson-style excursion into the quirks of history, actually takes place in New York City, but replicates a London ambiance in the New World. "Furniture" depicts how the past may come to the rescue during present trials. And the closing essay, "Lost London Writers," serves as an excellent Baedeker to the literary tradition Moorcock seeks to continue.

But the three core stories here are "London Bone," "The Clapham Antichrist" and "The Cairene Purse."

"London Bone" is a wry and mordant satire on commerce and fads. Narrated by the irrepressibly mercantile Raymond Gold, this piece recounts the great vogue for London Bone in the early years of the twenty-first century. Semi-fossilized skeletal shards, the Bone becomes highly collectible once Gold and his partners enlist some archaeology grad students to insure a steady supply from a secret construction site. But Bone is more than it seems, and events quickly snowball to global proportions, while Gold finds himself riding a tiger all the way to rueful wealth.

The finest story here, "The Clapham Antichrist," provides the

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definitive distillation of Moorcock's romantic sentiments about London. With its portrait of the apocryphal Sporting Club Square and the Square's most famous resident, Edwin Begg, a renegade visionary exholyman, this story succeeds in conjuring up an otherwordly city that comes into focus only for those with eyes unjaded enough to see it.

And although "The Cairene Purse" takes place in Egypt, it too conveys a similar sense of precious antiquities forsaken, and ways of life driven into the dust due to greed and rapacity. As Paul von Bek searches across a landscape transformed by near-future events for his lost sister Bea, who has fallen into strange company—Sufis, nomads and possibly UFO aliens—we learn that being exiled from Paradise is the inevitable sentient condition.

Moorcock's deep wisdom and polished story-telling skills, honed though five decades of writing, evoke the terrors and beauties of our oft-ignored urban infrastructures in a way both retrospective and proleptic.

The byline of Melvin Burgess is too-little known in the USA—despite his having penned the novel *Billy Elliot*, transformed recently into a big-screen feature—although he's a prize-winning, critically acclaimed author in the UK. Certainly his novel *Bloodtide* (Tor, hardcover, $24.95, 371 pages, ISBN 0-765-30048-6) marks his most high-profile appearance yet to the eyes of genre readers. And if this book is any indication, Burgess is a writer to admire and pursue further.

Imagine conflating Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980), John Crowley's *Beasts* (1976), Poul Anderson's *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* (1973), and Delany's *The Einstein Intersection* (1967), then tossing in a dash of Mark Geston and Cordwainer Smith. The result is a brutal, mythic stew, alternately surreal and naturalistic, veering from pure fantasy to quasi-cyberpunk SF. Miraculously, the whole package forms a cohesive, entrancing whole, compulsively readable from start to finish.

Roughly one hundred years from now, the city of London has been cordoned off from the rest of the world, after sinking into a kind of contagious barbarism. Surrounding the city is a ring of land ceded to the halfmen, bioengineered and cyborged human-animal hybrids. Beyond lies a tantalizing high-tech civilization that the captive Londoners long to reach, as half-conquerors, half-supplicants. Inside the city, a feudal, quasi-primitive, quasi-technological existence continues, with dominion divided between two families. One empire is headed by Val Volson and his four children. The other is ruled by a young scion named Conor. Val Volson's plan: to unite the two warring camps by marrying his fourteen-year-old daughter Signy to Conor. This simple tactical decision sets off a course of violent events that will cascade down the next decade, ending only in the bloody martial tsunami of the title. Signy and her twin brother Siggy are the main players (with intermittent chapters told from their POVs), but a large cast of supporting characters—including two half-women, Melanie the Pig and Cherry the Cat—expand our perspectives.

As Burgess informs us in an afternote, his novel is modeled on Iceland's *Volsunga Saga*, and this ancient tale of berserker rage, godly intervention and familial honor transplants perfectly to Burgess's postapocalyptic setting. The motivations of the characters are painted in broad, archaic strokes, yet with surprising streaks of subtlety. For instance, when Siggy realizes that Melanie the Pig has been starving

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herself to give him the food he needs to recover from his wounds suffered under Conor's torture, Siggy's sense of the halfmen as worthless animals undergoes a sharp reversal. His relationship thereafter with his porcine savior is one of the highlights of the tale.

Burgess employs a prose style that's hard-edged, colloquial, vivid and straightforward, yet capable of surprising spasms of poetry. Bardic, I suppose, would sum it up. And although sometimes Signy comes off like Britney Spears starring in a remake of the middle, post-catastrophe segment of H. G. Wells's *Things to Come* (1936), overall the compulsions that drive the actors and the moral decisions they make are totally believable in context.

With its themes of incomprehension leading to disaster, species prejudice, and the reptilian triumph of the id over superego, *Bloodtide* brilliantly illustrates that atavism lurks just a millimeter below our civilized façade.

Tales that focus on strange environments form a fascinating subsection of SF. Larry Niven's *The Integral Trees* (1984), Stephen Baxter's *Raft* (1991), Christopher Priest's *Inverted World* (1974), Robert Forward's *Dragon's Egg* (1981), and Hal Clement's *Mission of Gravity* (1954) are just the top titles that leap to mind. Such novels—of places where quirks of physics, chemistry, or cosmology create venues in which all our assumptions about daily life go out the window—often provide the best kind of cognitive estrangement that SF has to offer.

To this illustrious roster must now be added Adam Roberts's smashingly weird *On* (Gollancz, trade, £10.99, 388 pages, ISBN 0-575-07177-X), which features an Earth trapped in an anomaly that causes gravity to act at a difference of ninety degrees to its normal operation. What this means is at first hard to apprehend, but soon made quite vivid. Picture our current Earth as a basically flat tabletop with a slightly variable topography, with ourselves firmly planted atop. Now tilt that surface ninety degrees, so there's a top and bottom to it. Everything from oceans to people slides off, except where a precarious foothold can be obtained on the slopes of the new ledges that were once hillsides or mountainsides. Our world is now the Wall.

This catastrophic upheaval occurred over one hundred years before our story opens, and the pitiful remnant of mankind has adapted as best they can, digging shelters into the Wall, always dreading death by falling off their world, and moving about only where ledges, ladders and makeshift stairways permit. Most survivors live a simple village life. This segment includes our young hero, Tighe. Born with an inquisitive mind (Tighe's mother complains, "This boy will drive us all over the ledge, will he *never* stop with his questions? Will he smash my head *apart* with all his questions? On and on and on . . ."), Tighe finds his cloistered peasant life confining. But no frontier beckons—until Tighe falls off the Wall.

Plummeting Downwall for miles, Tighe is saved from death only by collision with a hot-air balloon. The superior empire he now finds himself co-opted into is at war with a neighbor. And that war will provide Tighe with a swift and brutal maturation. (Tighe's dark skin and his experiences as a helpless pawn of forces larger than himself make explicit Roberts's intended parallels with the savage African wars of our own period, which have seen innumerable teenagers used as cannon fodder, and this segment of the novel forms a strong indictment of re-

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cent barbarism.) But even this brush with "civilization" cannot prepare Tighe for his ultimate confrontation with the secret masters of the Wall, a confrontation that undermines everything Tighe has come to know.

Tighe's biography is a sad one, and Roberts delivers it with merciless precision, yet not without empathy. Some scenes are absolutely harrowing, especially when Tighe and his fellow juvenile soldiers flee through the perilous Meshwood. But although Tighe's character bends and deforms, his native optimism and verve propel him ever onward. Roberts's skill at composing Vancian societies and languages (I'm sure Vance's "The Men Return" was an influence here, as indeed must have been Keith Roberts's *Kiteworld* [1985]) is admirable. I have some reservations about the literal *deus ex machina* ending—does it presage a sequel, or merely the end of all hope?—but will accept it gladly for all the marvels that have gone before.

Adam Roberts, whose *Salt* (2000) was a spectacular debut, has now demolished any possible talk of sophomore slump with this book, which is radically different both from its predecessor and from most of its peers.

And what of the climate for shorter fiction in the Darkling Isles? A number of flourishing magazines provide shelter and sustenance for both British and American short-story writers. Here we'll take a look at only four.

Interzone <*www.sfsite.com/interzone*> is the vigorous granddaddy of UK SF zines, and, in its twentieth anniversary year, continuing under the capable hands of editor David Pringle, it has never looked stronger or been more at the forefront of introducing new writers and nurturing established ones. Running like a well-oiled machine, *Interzone* continues to experiment, most recently by increasing its media coverage. In fact, the hefty amount of non-fiction that *Interzone* publishes—essays by Gary Westfahl, interviews by Nick Gevers, reviews by Paul McAuley and others—offers a sense of family identity that the oft-times heterogenous fiction—testament to editor Pringle's catholic tastes—might otherwise not. The November 2001 issue, to hand as I write, features satire from Dominic Green reminiscent of a twenty-first century Edmund Cooper; sophisticated cultural exegesis from Thomas Disch; a Sheckleyan cybersex extrapolation from Greg Benford; cross-dimensional hijinks from newcomer Chris Beckett; and a translated fable from Yugoslavia's Zoran Zivkovic. All in all, a superb issue of the last true monthly periodical in the field.

Next most established in our selection is **The 3rd Alternative** <*www.ttapress.com*>, helmed by Andy Cox. This oversized banquet of fiction and features—Number 28 is to hand—shows a sophisticated design sense, with an inviting layout and some gorgeous artwork. A story by Tim Lees conjures up a fusion of the work of Kathe Koja and Christopher Priest; Martin Simpson's piece riffs inventively on Heinlein's "Lifeline"; James Van Pelt amuses with a slice of life from a fast-food joint; Pras Stillman's alien-in-disguise tale brings to mind classic Silverberg; the fabled Burning Man experience is interpreted askew by Ryan van Cleave; and the aftermath of childhood weirdness is chronicled by Alexander Glass. Additionally, an interview with Graham Joyce, film and book reviews and commentary by Allen Ashley round out the feast. Glossily attractive yet firmly grounded in the best genre values, *The 3rd Alter-*

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native should be a first choice for anyone with an interest in fine writing attractively presented.

With its seventh installment, **Spectrum SF** <*www.spectrumsf.co.uk*> makes a quantum jump in size (now boasting an awesome 192 pages) and amps up its already high quality level. Under the earnest and keen-witted direction of editor Paul Fraser, this digest-sized zine features the opening half of Charles Stross's first novel, *The Atrocity Archive*, a wild blend of Poul Anderson, Ian Fleming, and Lovecraft, plus an emotionally touching novelette by Eric Brown and accomplished stories by Mary Soon Lee, Josh Lacey, and David Redd, the latter of whom wrote several knockout pieces in the sixties, then more or less disappeared. (Fans of Redd's work might also consult back issue of *Asimov's* itself, specifically the Mid-December 1993 and March 1995 issues, for more of Redd's unique tales.) Fraser's coaxing of new stories from Redd—this one is a stylistically innovative tale of the clash of two economic systems and philosophies—is the kind of tactic typical of Fraser's desire to make his magazine go the extra mile. A very special publication, much in the classy manner of *Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

The newest entrant in the ranks of British zines comes from D.F. Lewis, better known as a fiction writer himself than a publisher, and his brainchild is a singular one. First off, **Nemonymous** <*www.nemonymous.com*> is published in a unique, handsome, perfect-bound format roughly as big as an auto-owner manual. But more importantly, all the stories in Issue One are printed without bylines. "The authors of these sixteen stories will have their by-lines published in Issue Two of *Nemonymous*, together with a new selection of stories the by-lines of which will in turn be published in Issue Three." This gimmick seeks to free the stories from all judgment-provoking attributes of race, gender, nationality, reputation, or age, placing them squarely in a Zen-style neutral zone where, ideally, your reactions should derive only from the texts themselves. As if encouraged by this experimentation, the stories are mostly sophisticated slipstream fantasy, with only a rare foray into more rigid genre material. I found all the selections of a uniformly good quality, although admittedly they did tend to blur into a homogeneous mass by the end. I tried playing the expected guessing game a little, venturing so far as to imagine that perhaps Lisa Tuttle wrote "Breaking Rules," about two women engaged in a plate-breaking contest. But on the whole, I was content to let the stories ride on their own anonymity. If Lewis's stunt succeeds, I expect it will be, as with all zines, due to the sheer quality of the fiction, rather than to any buzz generated by its eccentric presentation. ○

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SF Conventional Calendar

Join the ConJose World SF Con by July 15, or join at the door for much more. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

JULY 2002

12–14—**ReaderCon**, For info, write: **Box 38-1246, Cambridge MA 02238.** Or phone: **(617) 258-7487** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) readercon.org. (E-mail) info@readercon.org.** Con will be held in: Burlington MA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Marriott. Guests will include: Octavia Butler, Gwyneth Jones.

12–14—**Shore Leave, (410) 496-4456. www.shore-leave.com.** Marriott, Hunt Valley (Baltimore) MD. Star Trek.

12–14—**AnthroCon, www.anthrocon.org.** Adams Mark, Philadelphia PA. Bruton. Furries/anthropomorphics.

12–14—**PulpCon, www.pulpcon.org. tables@pulpcon.org.** Convention Center, Dayton OH. Old pulp magazines.

12–14—**StarFury, www.members.aol.com/xenaevent.** Park Hotel Heathrow, London England. Lieck, M. Clarke.

12–14—**Japan National Con, www.homepage2.nifty.com/u-con.** Hotel Gyokussen, Tamayu, Shimane, Japan.

13–15—**ConTagion, www.contagion.co.uk.** Quality Central Hotel, Glasgow Scotland. Media-oriented con.

18–23—**Costume College, (562) 945-7955. www.costumecollege.org.** Airtel Plaza, Van Nuys CA. Masqueraders.

19–21—**ConEstoga, (918) 836-5463. kd.wentworth@sff.net.** Sheraton, Tulsa OK. E. Moon. N. Thomas, L. Wolf.

19–21—**VulKon, (954) 441-8735. www.vulkon.com.** Airport Hilton, Tampa FL. Commercial Star Trek con.

19–21—**ShoujoCon, www.shoujocon.com. info@shoujocon.com.** Hilton, E. Brunswick NJ. Anime.

19–21—**ClueFest, (972) 669-9932.** Harvey Hotel, Plano (Dallas) TX. J. Burke, J. Spizer. Mystery fiction.

21–28—**Jerry Doyle Cruise, (800) 607-9246. susan@swaintours.com.** Ft. Lauderdale FL to Caribbean points.

26–28—**MythCon, c/o 2435 S. Franklin, Denver CO 80210. mythcon33@rialto.org.** Boulder CO. Work of Tolkien.

26–28—**LibertyCon, Box 695, Hixson TN 37343. www.libertycon.org.** Chattanooga, TN. Stirling, Elmore, Ringo.

26–28—**ConFluence, Box 3681, Pittsburgh PA 15230. confluence@spellcaster.org.** Pittsburgh PA. Hal Clement.

26–28—**ConVergence Farscape Party, 832 Muddy Branch Rd., Gaithersburg MD 20878.** Cincinnati OH.

26–28—**BotCon, Box 905, Kendallville IN 46775. www.botcon.com.** Grand Wayne Center, Wayne IN. Media.

AUGUST 2002

1–4—**ComiCon Int'l., Box 128458, San Diego CA 92112. (619) 491-2475.** Convention Center. The big comics do.

1–4—**Starfleet Int'l., Box 4394, Visalia CA 93278. (559) 897-0302.** Doubletree Airport, San Jose CA. Trek.

2–4—**DiversiCon, Box 8036, Minneapolis MN 55408. www.sfminnesota.com.** Due, S. Barnes. "Diversity in SF."

2–4—**ConChord, Box 61172, Pasadena CA 91116. www.nyx.net/~bgold/conchord.** Airtel, Van Nuys. SF singing.

8–11—**GenCon, Box 1740, Renton WA 98057. (800) 529-3976.** Midwest Exp. Ctr., Milwaukee WI. Big game meet.

9–11—**Canada Nat'l. Con, Box 20098, Calgary AB T2P 4J2. www.con-version.org.** Metro. Ctr. De Lint, Landis.

9–11—**Crescent City Con, Box 52622, New Orleans LA 70152. ccno@aol.com.** Landmark B. W., Metarie LA.

9–11—**UniCon, c/o Furlong, 17 Cow Ln., Didod OX11 7SZ, UK. www.unicon.org.uk.** Cheltenham UK. Klettner.

16–18—**ArmadilloCon, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755. (512) 477-6259. www.armadillocon.org. renegade@jump.net.**

29–Sep. 2—**ConJose, Box 61363, Sunnyvale CA 94088. www.conjose.org.** San Jose CA. The WorldCon. $180.

AUGUST 2003

28–Sep. 1—**TorCon 3, Box 3, Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1A2. www.torcon3.on.ca.** WorldCon. C$220/US$145.

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NEXT ISSUE

SEPTEMBER NOVELLAS

Two exciting novellas and a full measure of first-rate shorter stuff await you here next issue. Our evocative September cover story, by **Eleanor Arnason**, winner of the James Tiptree, Jr. Award and author of the well-known novel *Women of the Iron People*. Arnason takes us to a strange planet sunk in its own version of a medieval past for a fascinating study of the birth of the Scientific Method. This is an intricate, moving, and quietly lyrical portrait of a rebellious and sharp-minded woman born into a time she's out of synch with and a world that refuses to see what *she* sees all around her, as we're introduced to "The Potter of Bones." A haunting tale, one not easy to forget. The vivid cover is by **Fred Gambino**. From a pastoral, low-tech alien world, our next novella rockets us into a very human but *very* complex and strange future that's about as high-tech as it's possible to *get*, as new writer and current Hugo finalist, **Charles Stross** (one of the most exciting SF writers working at the beginning of the new century) continues the saga of Manfred Macx that began with "Lobsters" (June 2001), as the snowballing chain of events set in motion by Manfred now leads his *daughter* (a peculiar posthuman entity that even Manfred might find a bit bizarre!) into deep space (sort of), with as fabulous and flat-out weird a crew as ever ventured out of Earth's gravity well, headed for a portentous meeting with an enigmatic alien "Router." This is as cutting edge as you can get without falling off the other side, and is sure to have lots of other writers saying "Damn, why didn't *I* think of that!"

ALSO IN SEPTEMBER

Acclaimed British "hard science" writer **Brian Stableford** warns us against some of the surprising dangers inherent in "Hot Blood"; **Kage Baker**, one of our most popular and prolific authors, returns to spin a wry and suspenseful tale whose dauntless young hero definitely is "A Likely Lad"; Nebula and Hugo-winner **Geoffrey A. Landis** gives us a "Turing Test" that we'd better not fail; and new writer **James Van Pelt** takes us to a melancholy future America for the haunting story of "The Last of the O-Forms."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column warns us against "Burning Science at the Stake"; and **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our September issue on sale at your newsstand on August 6, 2002, or subscribe today (you can also subscribe online, or order *Asimov's* downloadable electronic formats, at our *Asimov's* website, **www.asimovs.com**) and be sure to miss none of the great stuff we've got coming up for you this year!

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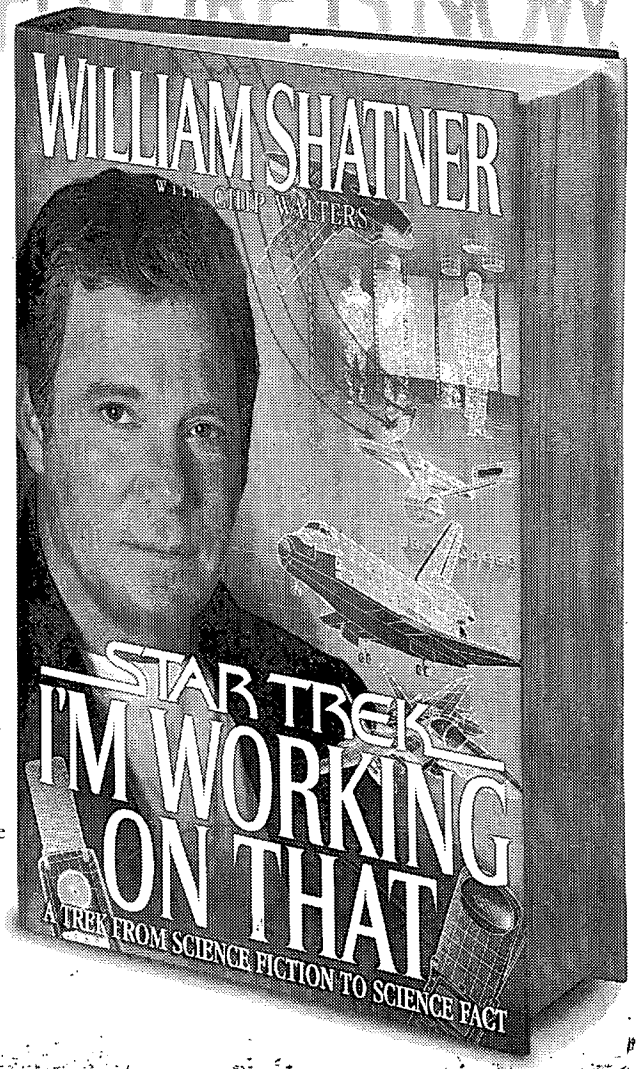

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